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The United Nations Support Office Model: Lessons from Somalia

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Executive Summary

The UN support office model has come of age in Somalia. Despite many challenges over the last fifteen years, it has delivered the logistical assistance that enabled two African Union (AU) missions to function reasonably effectively. As a result, a UN support office is now a viable option in the UN's conflict management toolbox that could be deployed to support a future AU-led mission or other peace operation in circumstances where a UN peace-keeping operation would be inappropriate.

The overriding lesson from the Somali case is that the UN support office model can only work effectively if the principal partners accept *shared responsibilities* and *shared accountabilities*. In Somalia, this entailed the troop-contributing countries (TCCs) committing to deploy their troops with the relevant force multipliers and enablers (with assistance from bilateral donors) and then seeking reimbursement, maintenance, and supplies from the UN; the AU committing to accurately define the “what, when, and where” of its force requirements and presenting them to the UN in a timely manner; and the UN committing to develop the systems and procedures for delivering those requirements quickly and efficiently. If things go wrong, all partners should also agree on mechanisms to ensure accountability and compliance.

If the principal partners cannot or will not deliver on their shared responsibilities and accountabilities, the support office model will break down. In Somalia, this happened most often when the TCCs did not deploy necessary matériel; when the AU lacked the capacity to plan effectively and generate force requirements in a timely and accurate manner; and when the UN was not able to support a kinetic war on the scale and speed needed to seriously weaken al-Shabaab. When these problems occurred, the UN support office was left in an impossible situation. To avoid such a breakdown, the partners must develop a workable process for making collaborative and genuinely joint decisions.

If the UN Security Council deploys another support office in an active warzone without a viable political pathway to peace, one key issue is what role the UN should play in building national security forces as part of its exit strategy. In countries like Somalia where other bilateral partners are better suited to this task, the UN should play a supporting role. However, where host governments lack such partners, the UN should take on a larger role in security sector reform and governance as early as possible with sustainable and predictable financing.

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Introduction

In 2009, the United Nations deployed an innovative support office mechanism to Somalia to help an African Union (AU) mission protect the Somali authorities and stabilize the capital city, Mogadishu. The UN Support Office for Somalia (UNSOS), as it is known today, later went on to operate across the whole country, providing support to the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), elements of the Somali security forces engaged in joint operations with the AU force, and several other clients across east Africa. UNSOS's experience in Somalia has established the viability of a support office mechanism for enabling non-UN peace operations and host state forces working with them.¹

Today, UNSOS is at the center of a debate about how to reconfigure the UN's presence in Somalia as the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) is preparing to hand over to the newly conceived AU Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) in 2025.² With the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2719 (2023) on the financing of AU-led peace support operations, UNSOS is also being examined with increased interest to determine whether a similar support package might be deployed in other theaters.

In light of these developments, this report considers the conditions under which a UN support package might be usefully deployed to assist non-UN-led peace operations and host state security forces beyond Somalia. The practical issues are whether the UN should offer support packages to peace operations led by other organizations and whether it can do so effectively if authorized by the Security Council. The report addresses these questions in

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three parts. First, it provides an overview and analysis of the two UN support offices in Somalia and their main activities. Second, it identifies the major lessons from the Somali case, focusing on the importance of integrated decision making, the scope and scale of the support package, accountability and compliance issues, personnel systems, and the need to prepare for the mission's transition and eventual exit. Finally, it reflects on how a UN support package might be designed and deployed in other theaters beyond Somalia.

Overview of the UN Support Office in Somalia

For fifteen years, a UN support office in Somalia has sustained two AU missions when the troop-contributing countries were incapable of doing so either financially or technically. Along the way, it has performed essential functions, including logistical support, casualty evacuation, airlift, and long-distance resupply. For AU troops, the deployment of the UN support office "was operationally life changing and individually lifesaving."³ More broadly, without the UN support package, there would not have been a major international presence and consistent support in Somalia. For example, before the UN's arrival, between April 2009 and May 2010, the inability to adequately supply AU peacekeepers in Mogadishu led to approximately 250 of them contracting wet beriberi from lack of thiamine. Over fifty peacekeepers had to be airlifted to hospitals in Kenya and Uganda, and four died.⁴ In sum, the UN support office was critical to the AU's progress, yet the story of UNSOS's genesis and evolution is not well-known.⁵

The first personnel from the original UN Support

¹ For details on the broader idea of a UN support package to non-UN entities, see: UN Security Council, *Implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2320 (2016) and 2378 (2017) and Considerations Related to the Financing of African Union Peace Support Operations Mandated by the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2023/303, May 1, 2023.

² On August 1, 2024, the AU Peace and Security Council endorsed the formation of AUSSOM. Two weeks later, on August 15, 2024, AUSSOM was welcomed by the UN Security Council in Resolution 2748.

³ Interview with former UN official, March 22, 2024.

⁴ John T. Watson et al., "Outbreak of Beriberi among African Union Troops in Mogadishu, Somalia," *PLoS ONE* 6, no. 12 (2011), e28345.

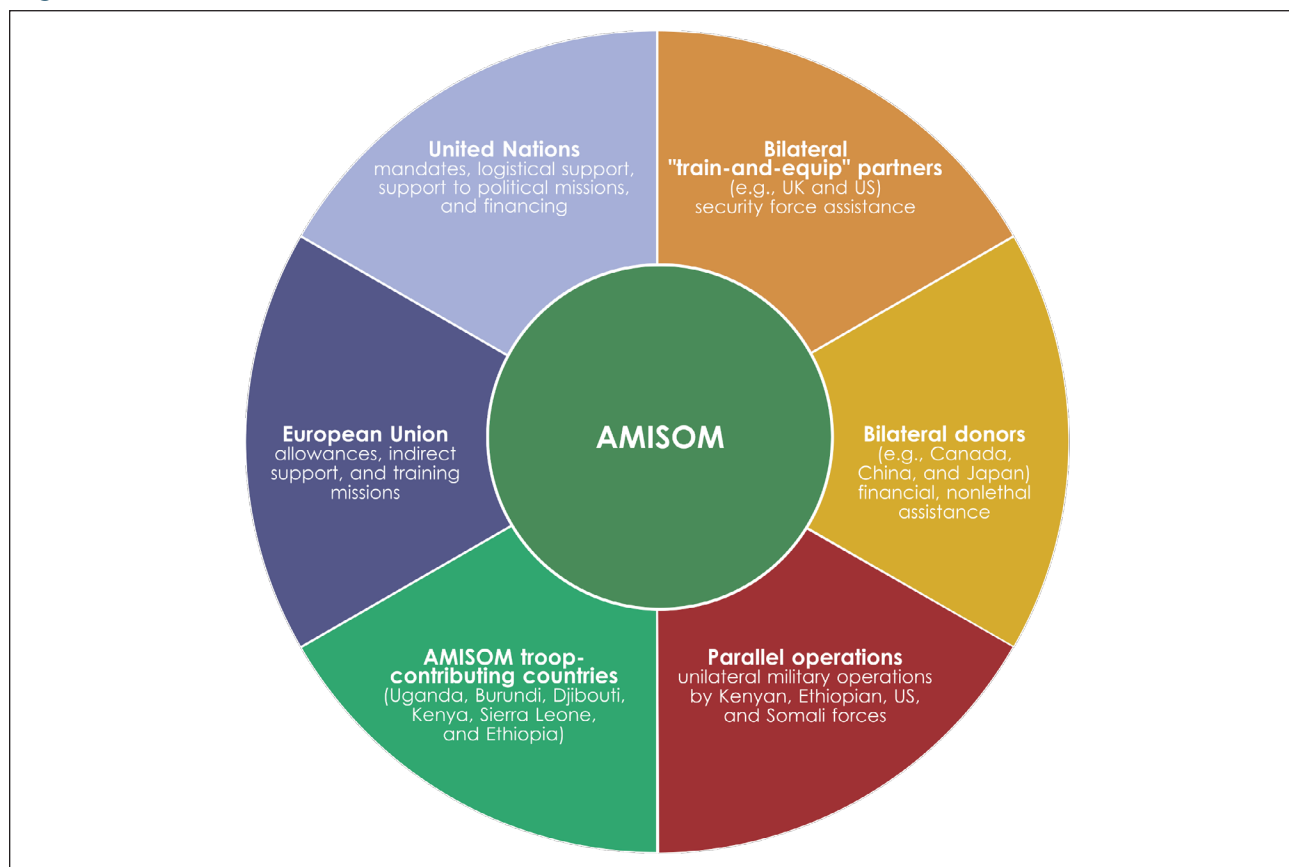
⁵ For a summary of UNSOA's genesis, see Paul D. Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 91–97.

Office for AMISOM (UNSOA) deployed to Mogadishu in June 2009. UNSOA was an innovative mechanism to provide logistical support to an AU mission that was operating in an active warzone.⁶ The UNSOA logistics network initially consisted of the Mombasa Support Base from which supplies were transported by land and sea every two weeks to a Mogadishu Logistics Base.

The support office was created because the circumstances in Mogadishu were not suitable for a UN-led peacekeeping operation. The city was in open warfare, with a complex mix of Somali armed groups fighting al-Shabaab loyalists for control, but the Security Council nevertheless wanted to support the struggling AU mission, AMISOM. In deploying a mission to Somalia, the AU was conse-

quently acting on behalf of the UN Security Council. But while the AU had the political space to take high risks, it did not possess the required resources, structures, and processes to support and sustain its operation. In contrast, the UN had more resources and adaptable processes but lacked the political space to conduct what was effectively a war-fighting operation. The UN Security Council therefore authorized the provision of practical support to counter al-Shabaab, which it viewed as a threat to international peace and security. As such, the support office was the UN's first Somalia-based contribution to a complicated set of partnerships that supported AMISOM⁷—arguably the most complicated set of partnership arrangements ever assembled to conduct a modern peace enforcement operation (see Figure 1).⁸

Figure 1. The “AMISOM model”



⁶ In multilateral peace operations, logistics support involves a range of partnerships between international organizations, states, and commercial contractors that inevitably raise difficult questions related to control and coordination of the processes. For a discussion, see: Katarina P. Coleman and Paul D. Williams, “Logistics Partnerships in Peace Operations,” International Peace Institute, June 2017.

⁷ At this stage, the UN Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS) was based in Nairobi, Kenya.

⁸ For a discussion of the “AMISOM model,” see: Paul D. Williams, “Lessons for “Partnership Peacekeeping” from the African Union Mission in Somalia,” International Peace Institute, October 2019.

Specifically, UN Security Council Resolution 1863 (2009) authorized UNSOA to support AMISOM in several functional areas: supplies (rations, fuel, and general supply); facilities and engineering, including construction, power generation, and water supply; medical support;⁹ aviation; transportation, including evacuation services; strategic movement support; equipment repair and maintenance; public information; strategic and tactical communications; and information and technology support. Later, the UN also provided support in other areas, including training for AU troops in a variety of skill sets, from medical techniques to vehicle maintenance; mine action services; and environmental management activities, such as water purification, water treatment in field bases, borehole construction,¹⁰ and climate-sensitive engineering designs for construction projects.

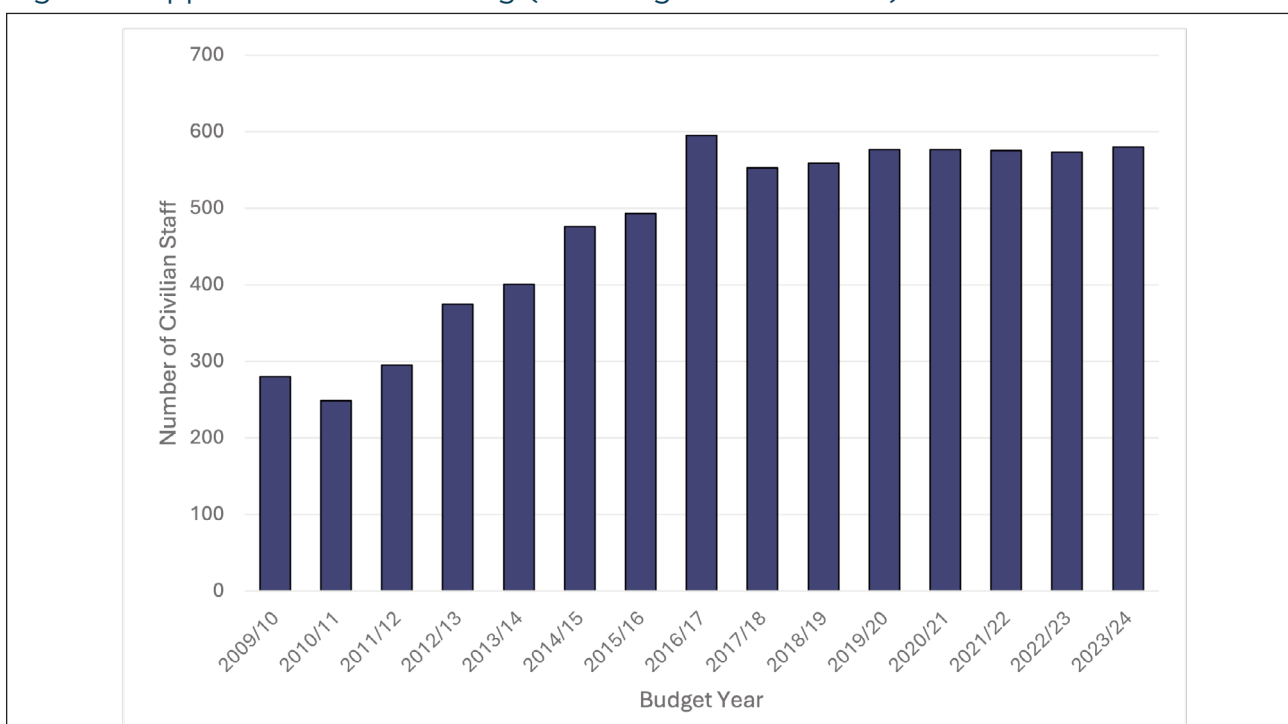
UNSOA delivered on its principal strategic task of keeping the AU force afloat and did so while operating with a “light footprint”

In terms of its design, UNSOA was a service-providing mechanism, financed from UN-assessed peacekeeping contributions and overseen by the UN Department of Field Support.¹¹ Initially, it was intended to support the AU force and act as a bridging mechanism to raise AMISOM’s operational standards in case its forces were incorporated into a future UN peacekeeping operation in Somalia.¹² This

approach was driven by three main factors: the high level of insecurity in Somalia, the desire to reduce financial costs, and a determination to maintain a “light footprint” in terms of UN personnel.¹³ UNSOA delivered

on its principal strategic task of keeping the AU force afloat and did so while operating with a “light footprint” (see Figure 2). The “light footprint” approach entailed using a mixture of contracted personnel and UN civilian staff, in large part because the former could tolerate higher-risk activities inside Somalia than the latter.

Figure 2. Approved civilian staffing (including UN volunteers)



9 UNSOS went on to support over thirty level 1 clinics and six level 2 hospitals throughout south-central Somalia. UNSOS-contracted level 3 hospitals are currently available via air transport in Kenya and South Africa.

10 Constructing boreholes on forward operating bases (FOBs) was preferable to relying on delivery by water tankers, which were often targeted by al-Shabaab.

11 UNSOA was the first field mission led by the UN Department of Field Support.

12 See: UN Security Council Resolution 1863, UN Doc. S/RES/1863, January 16, 2009.

13 Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, p. 225.

Although UNSOA's arrival had an immediate positive impact, it was not without controversy. Most importantly, when conducting military operations, no commander wants to be disempowered by being separated from their logistics. The UN support office model thus raised a fundamental conundrum over who controls logistical resources on the battlefield, which inevitably became a source of conflict between civilian and military authorities.

By 2012, the UN support package for AMISOM included explosive threat management capacity and the reimbursement of contingent-owned equipment (COE).¹⁴ In late 2013, Security Council Resolution 2124 (2013) authorized an exceptional expansion of the support package to cover elements of the Somali National Army (SNA) that were working jointly with AMISOM and were part of the AU mission's overall strategic concept. Henceforth, the UN provided a long list of nonlethal supplies to the SNA, including food, water, fuel, transport, tents, and in-theater medical support, as well as on-the-job training on aviation, movement control, medical support, and firefighting, among other things. Support to the SNA was funded by voluntary contributions from UN member states and administered via a trust fund; it was not paid from the UN's assessed peacekeeping contributions, which funded most of UNSOA's activities.¹⁵ UNSOA was also subsequently authorized to provide the standard suite of mission support services to UNSOM, which was established in June 2013.

The expansion of the UN's support package had several effects. First, it incentivized Kenya and Ethiopia to join AMISOM in 2012 and 2013, respectively, after both states had initially deployed forces unilaterally in Somalia.¹⁶ This facilitated the extension of state authority outside Mogadishu and

greatly expanded UNSOA's area of operations. Geographically, UNSOA's area of operations increased by 4,000 times from 2011 to 2014, from parts of one city to the whole of south-central Somalia. Until 2011, UNSOA was supporting activities in an area of operations of about 100 km². By late 2012, this area had increased to about 1,000 km², and by 2014 it had increased exponentially to approximately 400,000 km². Across this vast area, the UN would go on to support about eighty locations (mainly AU forward operating bases) and over 150 landing sites.¹⁷ Yet for most of its existence, UNSOA operated with a supply chain that was very Mogadishu-centric. This left the mission with minimal ability to deliver services to forward operations, as was most evident with the distribution of fuel and rations.

In 2015, UNSOA transitioned into UNSOS in recognition of the fact that, as a strategic enabler, the mission was playing a broader role than just supporting the AU force.

Second, the expansion of the mandate created a complicated relationship between the different UN entities in Somalia, specifically, the special representative of the secretary-general (head of UNSOM), who controlled an annual budget of generally less than \$100 million and the assistant secretary-general (head of UNSOS), who managed a budget of over \$500 million. Having two UN missions with separate budgets on separate budget cycles with distinct accounting was cumbersome.

Third, for the AU, the expansion meant that it went from being the UN's only client to one among several. Not only did this raise the issue of how UNSOA would prioritize and sequence its tasks, but it also left the AU unclear about how much of the UNSOA budget would flow to supporting its mission.¹⁸ Indeed, due to the competing demands made on its limited resources, the UN support office sometimes became the de facto arbiter of priorities among its different clients.¹⁹

14 UN Security Council Resolution 2036 (February 22, 2012), UN Doc. S/RES/2036. COE items are agreed in the memorandum of understanding between the UN and TCCs. The TCCs are responsible for servicing COE but are eligible for reimbursement from the UNSOS budget, which is paid quarterly. Resolution 2036 also stated that, to avoid donors paying for equipment twice, AMISOM TCCs could not receive UN reimbursement for equipment that had been donated to them for use in AMISOM.

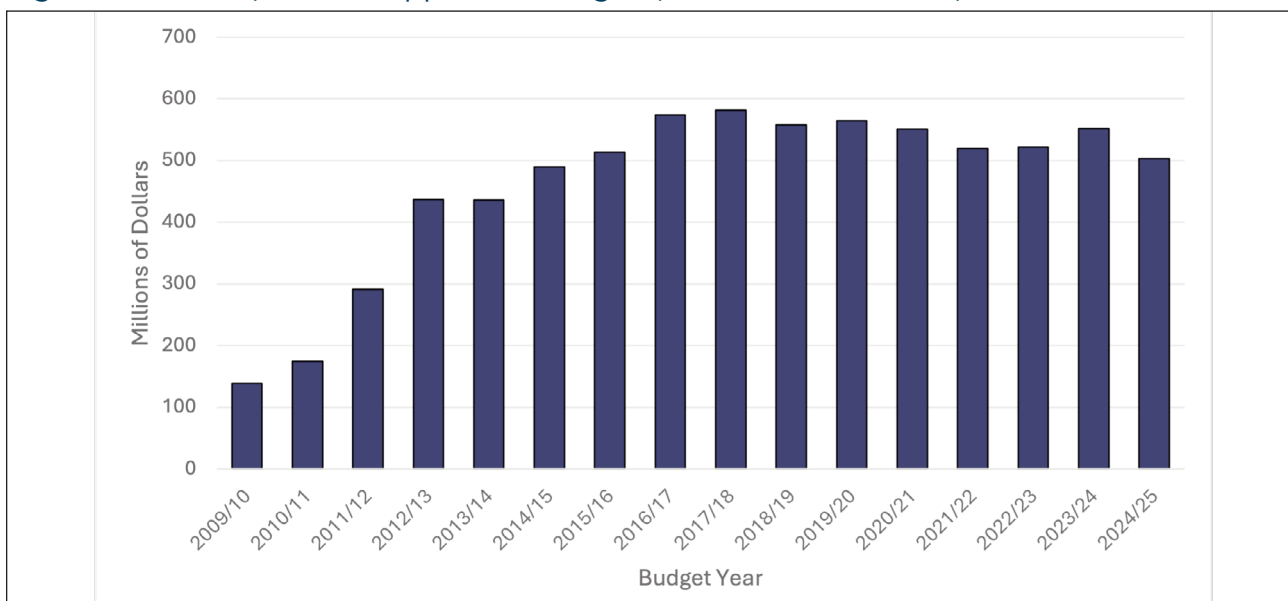
15 British Embassy Mogadishu, "UK Contributes 2.75 Million Pounds in Support of Somali Security Forces," April 16, 2024. Overall, the UK has been the largest donor to the trust fund by far, contributing over 20 million pounds since 2022.

16 See: Paul D. Williams, "Joining AMISOM: Why Six African States Contributed Troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 12, no. 1 (2018).

17 Interview with UN official, March 13, 2024. It is beyond the scope of this report to determine whether UN support incentivized the establishment of so many forward operating bases, but it is an issue the UN should consider when designing any future support package.

18 Interview with AU official, May 29, 2024.

19 Interview with former UN official, March 23, 2024.

Figure 3. UNSOA/UNSOS approved budget (in millions of dollars)²⁰

In 2015, UNSOA transitioned into UNSOS in recognition of the fact that, as a strategic enabler, the mission was playing a broader role than just supporting the AU force; it was also supporting UNSOM, Somali security personnel, and several other initiatives. As the 2015 strategic review of UNSOA noted, the mission's mandate was expanded at least eight times between 2009 and 2015.²¹ At one stage, UNSOS was delivering a \$1 million per day logistics budget to support not only the AU mission but also Somali forces as well as a range of other clients inside Somalia and beyond, including UN entities and embassies.²² At its peak in 2023, UNSOS was supporting nearly 35,000 uniformed personnel, plus an additional 750 civilians.²³ It did all this with around 500 civilian staff (see Figure 2).²⁴

Overall, UNSOS received considerable, sustained, and predictable funding from UN assessed peace-keeping contributions (see Figure 3). Nevertheless, one practical challenge in an environment as turbu-

lent and hostile as south-central Somalia was how to build sufficient flexibility into the support office budget, such as through standby arrangements to meet surge and unforeseen requirements.²⁵ This was mainly dealt with through the mission's delegated budgetary authority, which enabled it to meet such requirements by reprioritizing the projected budget to move funds between budget lines.²⁶ However, when it came to supporting host-government security forces working jointly with the AU mission, the voluntary trust fund model was not efficient and ultimately undermined the implementation of an effective exit strategy.

Given the vast area of operations and the high-threat environment, aviation assets have proved a vital part of the UN support office in Somalia. From 2019 to early 2024, UNSOS had between twenty and thirty air assets, usually six fixed-wing and between fifteen and twenty rotary-wing.²⁷ It also operated a variety of unarmed drones. It is important to recall two things. First, the AU force was

²⁰ The budget for 2024/25 is the UN secretary-general's proposed budget.

²¹ See: UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 7 October 2015 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2015/762, October 7, 2015.

²² Interview with former UN official, April 1, 2024.

²³ UNSOA and UNSOS were mandated to provide nonlethal support to Somali security forces in joint or coordinated operations with the AU mission via Security Council Resolutions 2124 (2013), 2245 (2015), 2431 (2018), 2472 (2019), 2520 (2020), 2628 (2022), and 2687 (2023).

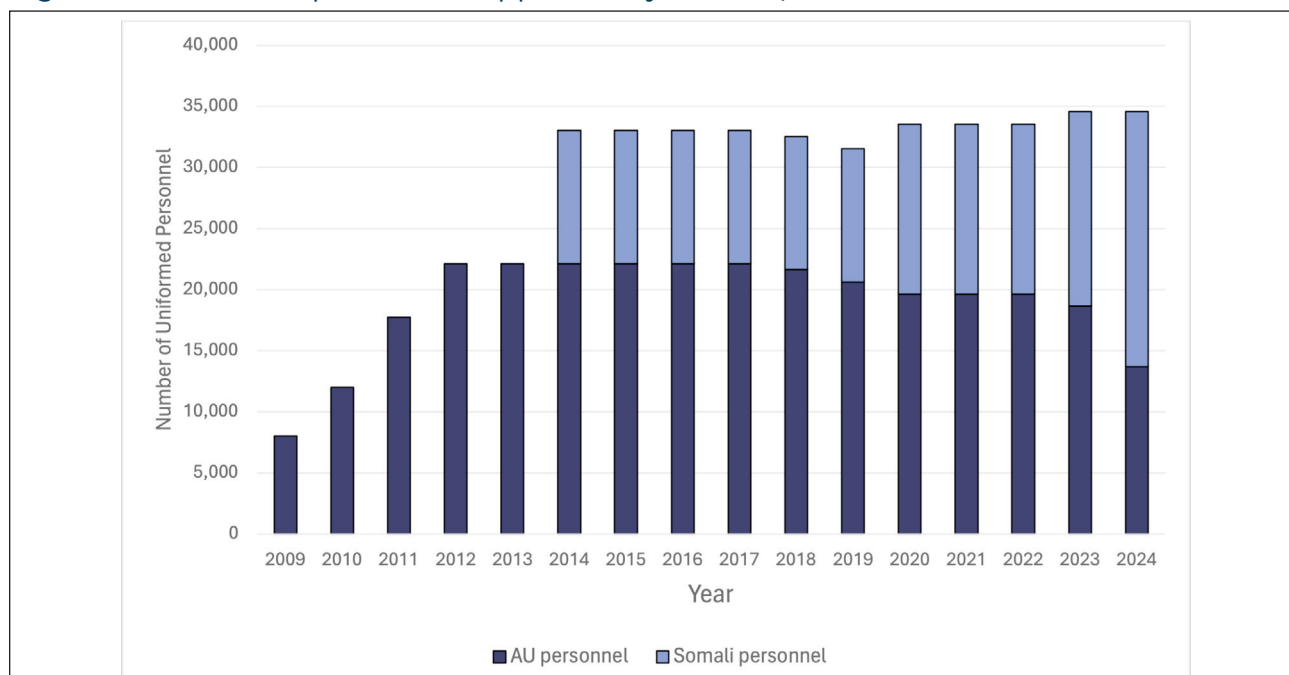
²⁴ Interview with UN official, March 22, 2024. A 2018 review of UNSOS identified understaffing "pain points" in key areas, including contract management, movement control, Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP) oversight, environmental management, conduct and discipline, and budget administration.

²⁵ Interview with former UN official, March 23, 2024.

²⁶ Interview with UN official, June 9, 2024.

²⁷ United Nations, "Monthly Mission Air Assets," April 30, 2024, available at <https://psdata.un.org/dataset/DOS-AIRCRAFTSBYMISSION>.

Figure 4. Uniformed personnel supported by UNSOA/UNSOS



never able to generate its authorized aviation component, leaving the UN support office to fill the gap. Second, the UN Security Council mandates stipulated that logistics should be delivered by road using a hub-and-spoke arrangement with the AU and Somali forces. To promote road movement, the UN and various other donors invested heavily in providing enabling units, vehicle and equipment reimbursement, and vehicle fuel. However, the AU and Somali security forces proved unable to secure the main supply routes between their bases. This imposed considerable unforeseen costs on UNSOS because land deliveries left convoys vulnerable to al-Shabaab ambush and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Hence, the decision was often made to fly more of the supplies instead. Within the UN, this was known as the “last mile” delivery problem, wherein UN safety and security protocols as well as capability limitations meant that vital supplies could not be delivered beyond certain hubs to remote, and hence vulnerable, locations. Over the last few years, about half of all logistical support was flown, which significantly increased the importance of AU and UN aviation capabilities, especially helicopters, and increased the cost of

these operations.²⁸ It was also operationally suboptimal because many airports outside Mogadishu were unable to receive night flights due to their state of disrepair.²⁹ UNSOS invested heavily in upgrading airstrips, but the repairs usually required heavy construction equipment that was at risk on the roads.

Since 2020, UN and AU air operations across Somalia have consistently increased, mainly involving sorties for combat, combat support, resupply, and medical support (see Figure 5). The number of AU, Somali, and civilian casualties being transported by air has also increased during this time (see Figure 6). To put this in context, UNSOS has recently been conducting more casualty and medical evacuations than the rest of the UN system worldwide.³⁰ In late 2023, the AU and UN integrated their aviation capabilities under the UNSOS Joint Mission Air Operation Center to centralize aviation planning and airspace management in light of the increase in operations within Somali airspace. AU and UN air operations in Somalia have had to navigate a high-risk environment with limited resources. The dangers were

²⁸ Interview with former UN official, April 1, 2024.

²⁹ Interview with UN official, March 23, 2024.

³⁰ Interview with UN official, August 22, 2024.

Figure 5. UNSOS flight hours

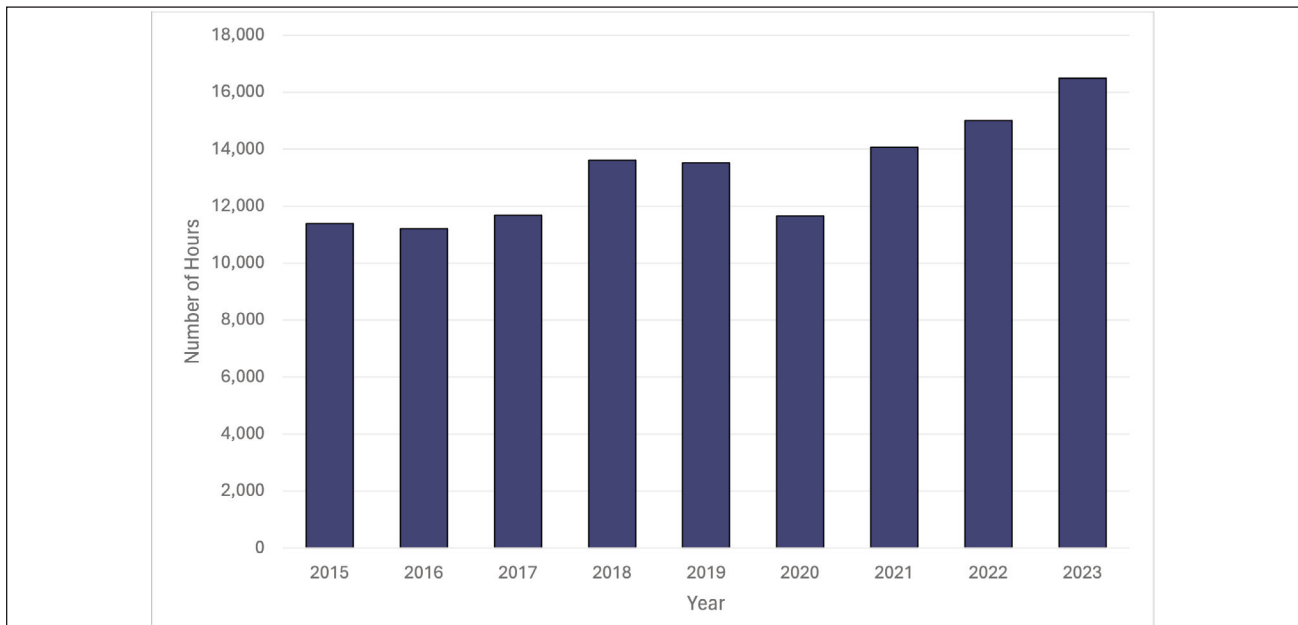
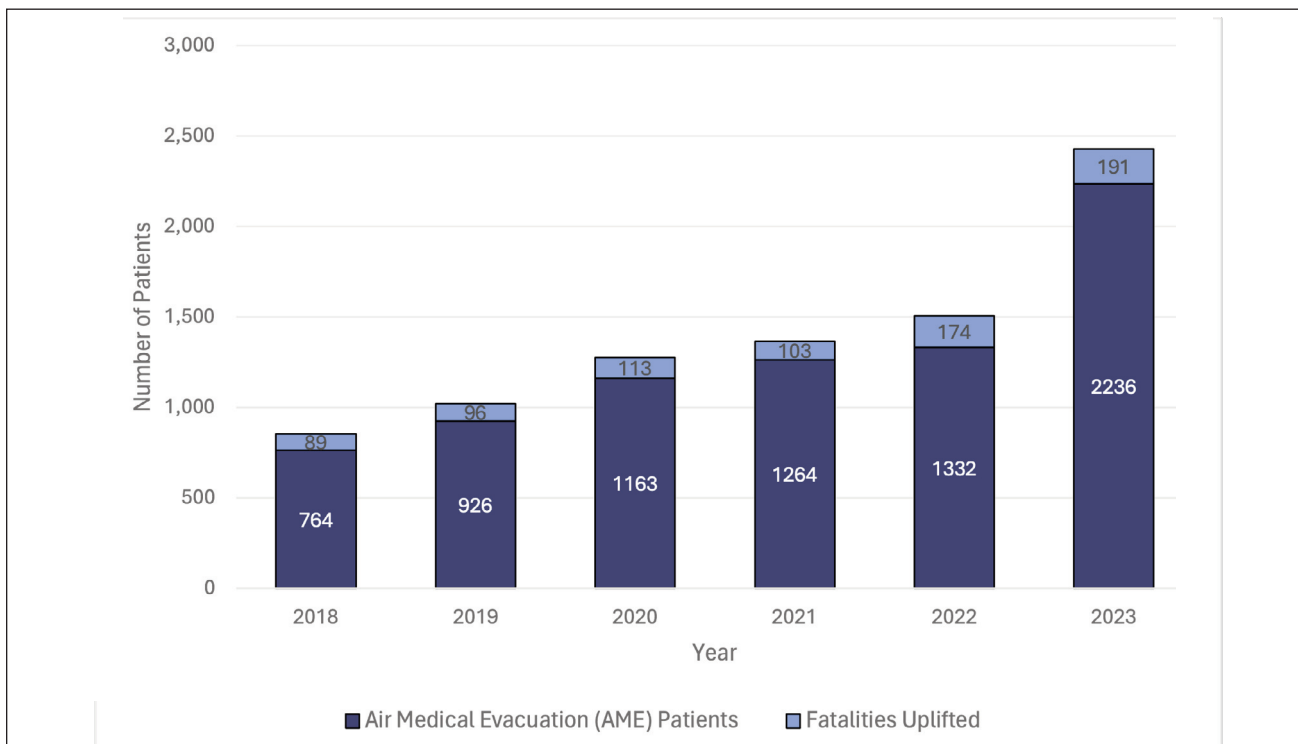


Figure 6. UNSOS patients airlifted



underscored in January 2024 when a UN helicopter crash-landed in an al-Shabaab stronghold and no rescue was conducted before the nine personnel onboard went missing, presumably captured by al-Shabaab.³¹

Finally, it is important to note that since mid-2022, UNSOS has been tasked with two largely contradictory objectives: to support a Somali-led offensive campaign and to facilitate the phased withdrawal of AU troops and the transition of responsibilities to Somali forces.³² As the head of UNSOS recently noted, it was particularly challenging to do this when resources were limited and there was a lack of sustained funding for supporting the SNA.³³ In response, UNSOS adopted a more decentralized approach in an effort to be more responsive to TCC requirements. This entailed pre-positioning supplies closer to the intended recipients at the sector headquarters and delegating some decision making to the sector level rather than force headquarters in Mogadishu.³⁴ This was a positive move and decentralization should be encouraged as a rule.

Because of the AU's limited role in the Somali-led offensive campaign, it is fair to say that UNSOS has devoted more time to the drawdown. This has involved a complicated set of activities, including moving AU troops from select forward operating bases (FOBs) to staging points and then repatriating those contingents.³⁵ However, it has also entailed repairing the FOBs that were to be handed over to the SNA and closing those that were not. This has included repairs of perimeter defenses as well as equipment like water treatment plants, generators, solar panels, storage facilities, and panels. This required either moving or refurbishing significant amounts of equipment and training Somali techni-

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cians on how to handle the equipment that was being handed over in the FOBs. Phase 2 of the AU drawdown, completed in January 2024, involved the repatriation of considerably more contingent-owned equipment than Phase 1. Finally, the decisions by the Federal Government of Somalia, AU, and UN Security Council to delay the phases by three to six months each and change troop withdrawals from the planned schedule meant that UNSOS has had to retain standby contracts to cover these eventualities and conduct more withdrawals than originally planned. Overall, it is not surprising that the approved UNSOS budget was increased for 2023/24 to cover these activities (see Figure 3).³⁶

Lessons Identified from the Somali Case

The UN support office model in Somalia provides several lessons. However, these lessons come with two notes of caution. First, it is difficult to disentangle an evaluation of UNSOA/UNSOS from that of the AU missions (AMISOM and ATMIS) and the broader conflict dynamics in Somalia. Second, as a strategic enabler, the role of a UN support office is to

provide services for other actors. Hence, the mission was not designed to be in the political driving seat, nor could it control its own destiny. While all peace operations are dependent on factors beyond

their control, such as the choices made by sovereign governments and the drivers of conflict dynamics, this challenge is magnified in support missions. As a support instrument, UNSOS had little influence on broader international engagement in Somalia or even on major operational decisions, which were often dictated by the AU TCCs. The following lessons should be digested with these two points in mind.

31 Katherine Houreld, "Crew of Crashed UN Helicopter Waited for an Hour for Rescue before Kidnap," *Washington Post*, January 12, 2024.

32 For an overview of the Somali-led offensive campaign, see Daisy Muibu, "Somalia's Stalled Offensive Against al-Shabaab," *CTC Sentinel* 17, no. 2 (2024).

33 Aisa Kacyira, "Aisa Kirabo Kacyira Marks One Year as Head of UNSOS," UNSOS, April 7, 2024, available at https://youtu.be/_76znsDBEv4?si=Ky3Vkv5qnHLRoZDp.

34 Interview with UN official, June 9, 2024.

35 See: UNSOS, "UNSOS' Role During the Phase Two Drawdown," April 5, 2024, available at <https://youtu.be/xDCVgqrL5AQ?si=Z70a0MFw9S3Im6j->.

36 For a detailed explanation of the increase, see: *UN General Assembly, Overview of the Financing of the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Budget Performance for the Period 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2022 and Budget for the Period from 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/77/779, March 1, 2023, p. 124.

Integrated Decision Making

All peace operations face a range of challenges related to decision making, but for a support office mission, integrated decision making is the heart of the entire enterprise. The support office model hinges on the mission's ability to make collaborative decisions, both with external partners and with other UN entities. This matters both in terms of the substantive content of those decisions and the process by which decisions are made in the context of what the secretary-general has referred to as "partnership peacekeeping."³⁷

The Somali case demonstrates how integrated decision making is more likely to occur when there is strategic alignment and coordination among the major parties and stakeholders. Ideally, the relevant partners should be committed to a shared and clear strategy underpinned by the necessary resources. They can then translate this strategy into clear priorities and work together to implement them with appropriate command authority and hierarchy. In Somalia, however, short of al-Shabaab's surrender, which was highly unlikely, there was no viable strategy to end the war.

In practical terms, efforts to develop integrated decision making hinged on the various tripartite mechanisms inside Somalia (involving the UN, AU, and Federal Government of Somalia) as well as on UNSOS's collaboration with the wider UN system. These mechanisms would only work well if the principal partners accepted shared responsibilities and shared accountabilities. To give one example at the operational level, integrated planning was vital. The UN, AU, and Federal Government of Somalia needed a common vision of operational priorities that supported their strategic objectives. They did not always achieve this in practice. Sometimes, collaboration was hindered by technical issues, such as challenges with making information contained in the UN's Umoja information management system accessible to AU personnel. At other times, disagreements

about the best course of action among the African TCCs caused problems. In military terms, operations needed to be informed about logistical capacities and constraints, while the logistical support itself needed to meet the operational requirements of where and when those operations were taking place.³⁸ Here, the fragmented nature of military leadership within AMISOM/ATMIS and its troop contributors made it very difficult to establish a consistent and coherent approach to planning and decision making. Integrated decision making was also hindered by a lack of trust between the AU TCCs, force headquarters, and the UN, which frequently saw UN personnel being excluded from AU planning meetings. The result was AU operational directives being issued days or weeks before an operation, while the UN was working with procurement horizons measured in months.

In sum, all the key organizations need their people in the room where it happens. This is necessary to both build and sustain trust regarding operational details.

Scope and Scale of Support

Well before the mission deploys, the Security Council should clarify what support the UN will provide and what it will not. This is important for two main reasons. First, it enables the UN to proactively manage the expectations of local and international audiences. Second, without clarity, the operational needs of the mission and its partners cannot be identified, resourced, and met effectively.³⁹

The UN support office faced unrealistically high expectations from the AU, its TCCs, and the Federal Government of Somalia. This suggests that support missions need to include dedicated strategic communications capabilities from day one to help manage expectations and reputational risks.⁴⁰ Arguably the biggest gap between expectations and capabilities was the TCCs' desire for the UN to deliver war-fighting capabilities and support, which the UN was not initially prepared to do. This gap only grew larger as the area of opera-

37 UN Security Council, *Partnering for Peace: Moving towards Partnership Peacekeeping—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2015/229, April 1, 2015.

38 In the case of UNSOS, the key entity was the joint operations center (JOC), which includes the UN, the Somali security forces, and ATMIS, as well as other international partners such as the US, UK, and EU. In 2022, UNSOS established JOCs in an additional six ATMIS sector headquarters to facilitate joint planning and coordination. Somali forces have been integrated into the JOC since October 2022.

39 Of course, the Security Council could subsequently alter the scope of the support package as circumstances evolved.

40 See: UN Department of Peace Operations and Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, *Policy: Strategic Communications in Peace Operations*, UN Ref. DPO 2024.04/DPPA 2024.01, June 1, 2024.

tions expanded across the vast territory of south-central Somalia. Considering that UNSOS was a political compromise between the AU, its TCCs, and the major funders of UN operations, the result was a slow-moving and complicated system of resourcing that involved detailed scrutiny and oversight by member states. On the positive side, UN personnel innovated many practices that were unknown or underutilized in UN operations, including the use of contractors and the development of more flexible procurement processes.⁴¹ Even so, UN support systems were ill-adapted to war-fighting, as they were generally risk-averse, highly bureaucratic, and not designed to effectively enable mobile or agile military combat operations.

The gap between UN structures designed for supporting peacekeeping and the realities of warfare in Somalia manifested itself in several ways. First, the sheer volume of supplies required by the AU forces in Somalia was much higher than in every other UN peacekeeping theater. Second, the UN package was generally for nonlethal forms of support.

There were gaps between UN structures designed for supporting peacekeeping and the realities of warfare in Somalia.

For example, the UN did not reimburse for ammunition, which was delivered via bilateral partners or by the TCCs themselves.⁴² Third, there were structural limitations on the UN's ability to support a war-fighting mandate. A good example is the counter-IED work of the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS), which was partly funded by UNSOS.⁴³ In practice, UNMAS could support only two of the three pillars of an effective counter-IED campaign: "train the force" and "defeat the device." The most important part of the third pillar, "defeating the network," is intelligence, but the UN avoided anything that involved intelligence, targeting, and the elimination of the network of people who supply, build, and emplace IEDs. A related problem was that the UNMAS counter-IED mandate might dissuade other external actors from funding additional activities in this sector out of the

mistaken belief that the UN had it covered.⁴⁴ Fourth, the UN's framework for reimbursement of contingent-owned equipment (COE) was not designed to support a war-fighting operation, although the UN was able to add new items to the COE framework via an agreed process involving the submission of an issues paper. It would therefore make sense to develop a new COE framework for kinetic operations—one that treats operational loss and damage as routine (as opposed to exceptional) and better provides for maintenance and spare parts.⁴⁵

The net result of these issues was that when the UN support offices were unable to consistently meet AU and TCC expectations, it generated friction. AU commanders complained about the splitting of military command and logistics, slow UN response times, nontransparent budget allocations, and lack of high-quality supplies, among other things.⁴⁶ UNSOS did attempt to align expectations with capabilities, including by sending delegations of its personnel to visit TCC capitals beginning in 2017.

Although UNSOS was not mandated to build AU logistical capacity for the long term, it is notable that the support office has for the most part substituted the AU's logistical capabilities rather than transferring these capabilities to the AU.

Concerning operational needs, there were multiple issues in Somalia where clarity was lacking. One example was that the UN and AU had different definitions of what counted as contingent-owned equipment. There was also confusion over the type of "nonlethal" equipment the UN was able to reimburse. For example, it was unclear whether the UN could reimburse frontline fighting vehicles such as armored personnel carriers. In this case, UNSOA decided to reimburse only vehicles for headquarters operations; any others would have to be sourced via the trust fund for the AU mission or

41 For over a decade, the UNSOA/UNSOS procurement process required all contracts above \$1 million to go through a lengthy, multilayered process for approval by the assistant secretary-general in the Office of Central Support Services. The solicitation process was also prone to long delays.

42 See: UN Security Council Resolution 2245, UN Doc. S/RES/2245, November 9, 2015, para. 12; and Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, pp. 221–222.

43 UNMAS is funded by UNSOM, UNSOS, and bilateral contributions from Japan. UNMAS, "Somalia," available at <https://www.unmas.org/en/programmes/somalia>.

44 Interview with security contractor, March 13, 2024.

45 Interview with former UN official, April 8, 2024.

46 Interview with AU official, March 23, 2024.

bilateral support packages.⁴⁷ A similar problem emerged in relation to intelligence gathering, one of the most important parts of the military campaign against al-Shabaab. For instance, UNSOS did not permit its medical supplies to be used by AU TCCs to treat civilians in civil-military operations, even though such operations were sometimes the best way to get information about al-Shabaab's activities and win over the local population.⁴⁸

However, arguably the biggest operational problem was the uncertainty of funding for AU troop stipends. This was a major gap in the UN support office model and eventually led to significant funding cuts, which in turn created serious tensions among the contributing countries, the AU, and external partners and lowered morale among the troops.⁴⁹ In addition, the Federal Government of Somalia wanted its security forces to receive the same entitlements as AU troops, which generated unrealistic expectations about the scale of UN logistical support they could receive. Over the last few years, this argument intensified in part due to a popular misconception among Somalis that UNSOS would offer the SNA the support it is currently providing to the AU forces when AU forces withdrew.⁵⁰ As this misconception was gradually dispelled, the Federal Government of Somalia recognized a greater need for a successor AU mission to follow ATMIS and eventually agreed to host AUSSOM starting in 2025.

The Somali case also highlights the importance of accountability and compliance, without which the mission's performance and legitimacy will suffer.

Accountability and Compliance

The Somali case also highlights the importance of accountability and compliance, without which the mission's performance and legitimacy will suffer. Peace operations should always operate in compli-

ance with relevant laws, and whenever one organization provides funds to support another, concerns about accountability will be prominent. As the Somali case demonstrates all too well, it is important that partners reach an early agreement on shared responsibilities, compliance mechanisms, financial and resource accountability measures, and the associated reporting. This should include a description of how violations and accountability failures, corruption, and fraudulent activity will be addressed.

Two unintended developments came about because the UN had to figure out how it would respond to allegations of civilian harm, sexual exploitation and abuse, and racketeering by AU and Somali forces.⁵¹ First, the UN had to establish mechanisms to deal with compliance problems in a situation where the AU did not have the capacity to

provide adequate oversight of AU forces in the field. Second, it had to establish mechanisms to mitigate the risk of fraudulent practices and corruption by AU and Somali units receiving UN-delivered support. In several respects,

Somalia was the key test case for new UN accountability and compliance mechanisms for peace operations, most notably the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP).⁵² Concerning the AU force, the most difficult challenge was the lack of consistent commitment by the TCCs to investigate allegations and punish perpetrators. For the Somali forces, a major barrier was the lack of biometric identification, which made it difficult for UNSOS to monitor compliance with the HRDDP and ensure the relevant personnel had been appropriately trained. The lack of SNA colocation with AU forces, largely due to mistrust between them, also impeded UNSOS's ability to provide oversight.

⁴⁷ Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, p. 223.

⁴⁸ Interview with security contractor, March 13, 2024.

⁴⁹ Interview with former UN official, April 8, 2024. Because of widespread misconceptions, it is important to recall that for the UN, personnel reimbursement is not compensation for services provided or risks taken, nor is it a substitute for salaries. Rather, it is a cost intended to help defray the common and essential additional costs incurred by TCCs for expeditionary deployment to a peace operation (i.e., the costs that TCCs would not otherwise incur if their troops stayed at home, such as pre-deployment medical costs, inland transportation, personal kit and equipment, and overseas allowances).

⁵⁰ Interview with UN official, March 29, 2024.

⁵¹ See: Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, chapters 8–10.

⁵² The policy was made public in 2013. See: UN General Assembly and Security Council, *Human Rights Due Diligence Policy on United Nations Support to Non-United Nations Security Forces*, UN Doc. A/67/775-S/2013/110, March 5, 2013.

Personnel and Contracting

In high-threat environments where the UN adopts a “light footprint” approach that relies on both contractors and UN staff, there should be clarity over which personnel need to be deployed in the theater, when, and where. In the Somali case, this raised the question not only of who should deploy in Somalia but also of the right balance between staff deployed in Mogadishu and the regional sectors. When UNSOA started, it had personnel deployed to Mogadishu, Nairobi, and Entebbe (with a few support staff in Addis Ababa). Initially, only UN contractors were deployed to Mogadishu because they were not subject to the security rulings issued by the UN Department of Safety and Security.⁵³ From 2012, more UN personnel were deployed to Mogadishu and, gradually, to some of the major urban areas beyond, including Kismayo and Baidoa. A 2018 strategic review of UNSOS noted the significant productivity costs of deploying staff in Somalia due, in part, to the monthly rest-and-recuperation (R&R) cycle and difficulties recruiting qualified staff to serve there.⁵⁴ Later, following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of staff in Somalia was reduced significantly. At the height of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, approximately half of UNSOS personnel worked remotely, with back office elements based in Kenya or the Regional Service Center Entebbe (RSCE).⁵⁵ All of this is to say that support missions need early clarity on how many people need to be physically present along with core mission leadership to run an effective field mission, including the execution of day-to-day operational needs.

Even if the UN had delivered the perfect package of war-fighting logistics and AU military operations had been fully resourced and supported, they could not have brought about lasting stability in Somalia alone.

Transition and Exit

A final set of lessons concerns missions’ transition and eventual exit. Missions will always struggle to implement an effective exit strategy without a viable

pathway to peace.⁵⁶ And by definition, a support mission’s exit will be symbiotically tied to the operation it is supporting. UNSOA was originally created to help a struggling AU mission that operated in only a few parts of one city. There was no peace process and little prospect of achieving military victory over al-Shabaab. Operating in an active warzone also made daily activities difficult, costly, and potentially deadly. Yet even if the UN had delivered the perfect package of war-fighting logistics and AU military operations had been fully resourced and supported, they could not have brought about lasting stability in Somalia alone. UN logistical support was not sufficient to create or catalyze a coherent and effective military force or to bring about a viable pathway to peace that would facilitate the UN mission’s successful exit. In sum, UNSOA arrived in Somalia without a clear exit strategy or plan in case those circumstances changed.

Years later, when the AU mission’s exit strategy finally solidified, it revolved around a managed drawdown of African peacekeepers and transfer of security responsibilities to Somali forces.⁵⁷ This was agreed upon without achieving victory over al-

Shabaab, without ensuring a peace agreement was in place, and without ensuring that Somali forces were ready to take over. It is true that UNSOS adopted some innovative approaches such as the creation of a transition planning cell to make the drawdown as orderly as possible, but this was not enough. It would be wise for any future UN support mission to prepare from day one for transitioning to a greater role for host-government forces. In reality, UNSOS had only a limited mandate and resources to support the development of Somali capabilities, and only for those troops working jointly with the AU mission.

Two additional complications are worth noting. First, UNSOS’s transition tasks were made more

⁵³ Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, p. 91.

⁵⁴ Interview with former UN contractor, March 22, 2024.

⁵⁵ Interview with former UN official, April 1, 2024.

⁵⁶ On the different approaches to “exit” available to peace operations, see: Paul D. Williams and Alex J. Bellamy, *Understanding Peacekeeping*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), chapter 20.

⁵⁷ For an overview, see: Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, chapter 13.

complicated by the power struggle over security forces between the Federal Government of Somalia and some of Somalia's Federal Member States and the attempts by some Somali leaders to politicize the security forces. Second, in terms of resources, the trust fund model that paid for the support to the Somali forces proved unreliable and ineffective because it could run dry and required too many mission resources to focus on fundraising, hence impeding longer-term strategic planning.

The Support Office Model beyond Somalia

Should the UN continue to offer support packages to peace operations led by other organizations, and can it do so effectively if authorized by the Security Council? The preceding analysis of the UN support office mechanism in Somalia suggests that this model is now a viable option for the Security Council. It also offers useful insights about how multilateral partnerships can be made to work effectively in future peace operations. This is especially relevant given discussions about implementing Resolution 2719 and what elements of the Somali experience might be replicated or need to be modified in future support office missions.

A Viable Option (with Limits)

UN support packages financed by the organization's assessed peacekeeping contributions are a viable option in situations that are not suitable for a UN-led peace operation and where the Security Council has identified a threat to international peace and security and authorized a non-UN peace operation. In Africa, this could involve supporting an AU-led peace operation, perhaps as a short-term response the UN could subsequently build on through a larger operation or as a longer-term peace enforcement operation that goes beyond the bounds of UN peace operations doctrine. In both scenarios, the AU must display the political ambition to conduct such a mission but is still not structured to manage the amount and type of support necessary to sustain it. In both scenarios, the UN should avoid deploying two parallel UN

missions with separate budgets and structures, as occurred in Somalia. If the UN were to support a future AU peace enforcement operation, the UN would also need to address the relationship between its support package and other UN system entities in the host state, which might feel uncomfortable being associated with an offensive military operation. Beyond Africa, the Security Council must think carefully about which organizations it would be willing to support in a similar manner elsewhere.

Integrated Decision Making

Ideally, the UN would not provide a support package under a "service provider-client relationship" but as part of a genuine strategic partnership. This means ensuring strategic alignment and coordination among the main parties and stakeholders from the planning phase until the mission's liquidation. After initial agreement on the strategy and mission mandate, there will need to be effective collaborative decision making and coordination mechanisms to adjust course and provide oversight when needed. Put bluntly, any future UN support office and its principal partners should be "joined at the head, heart, hip and legs," as one UNSOS review put it, ensuring all partners are structurally integrated into decision making at all levels and stages.⁵⁸

Three points are particularly important. First, the UN should establish a clear division of roles and responsibility between the UN support mechanism and any other in-country UN leadership. Second, if authorized by the Security Council, the UN must be willing to reform its own standards and systems to support war-fighting or peace enforcement mandates. Third, in order to work effectively with the AU, the UN needs a clear understanding of the AU's force requirements. Hence, the AU must ensure it has the capacity to define those requirements as early as possible.

Finally, TCCs that volunteer for peace enforcement operations will inevitably put pressure on any UN support mission to make special arrangements—that is, to bend or ignore some of the rules in their favor. Such special treatment should be avoided.

⁵⁸ *Comprehensive Independent Review of the United Nations Support Office in Somalia* (Unpublished document, 2018).

Instead, the Security Council should ensure that any AU peace operation it agrees to authorize and support has a coherent and unified command-and-control structure orchestrated by an effective multinational force headquarters. Such pressure from individual TCCs will decrease if the UN support mechanism can implement a decentralized approach to delivering assistance, such as through sector-specific strategies that ensure the support delivered matches local needs.

Scope and Scale

The Security Council and its partners must also reach an early agreement on the scope and scale of the support package. First, the council should tailor the scope of UN logistical support to the campaign's aims. Second, it should explicitly detail the type of support as well as what contingent-owned equipment will be reimbursed and what partner-owned equipment will be maintained by the UN.⁵⁹ Since any UN support office can only ever act as a facilitation mechanism, the Security Council should emphasize the need for the TCCs themselves to provide combat enablers and any combat logistics beyond the scope of the support package. Third, the council and its partners must ensure the appropriate resources are scaled to fulfill the mandate, which would then be reflected within the overall mission funding proposal. Strategic communications capabilities should be part of that proposal, and reliance on voluntary trust funds should be avoided.

Accountability and Compliance

Accountability and compliance mechanisms will always be politically sensitive topics, but they are necessary for both the effective performance and the legitimacy of the UN mission and its partners. Any future UN support package must be based on shared responsibilities and shared accountabilities among the partners. In practical terms, the mission must build in sufficient human rights compliance mechanisms and clarity over how accountability

failures, corruption, or fraudulent activity will be addressed, as well as reporting requirements to support both these responsibilities.

Personnel and Contracting

Assuming that UN support packages will be most needed in high-threat environments, such missions will likely make extensive use of contractors and require skill sets beyond those found in most peacekeeping operations. The UN should therefore seriously consider how it can hire and retain personnel with relevant specialist skills and when and where to deploy different types of personnel to run an effective operation. In relation to contractor

services, one particularly important innovation from UNSOS came in the aviation sector. Specifically, UNSOS shifted its procurement process from “invitation to bid,” where the UN identifies its preferred broad solution

(e.g., the type, number, and capacity of aircraft), to “request for proposal,” where the UN identifies the problem and asks potential vendors to devise their own solutions. This helped reduce costs, develop more tailored solutions to problems, and broaden the pool of vendors.⁶⁰

Transition and Exit

If a future UN support office is deployed to help an AU operation in circumstances like Somalia—namely, an active warzone without a peace process or viable political pathway to peace—then the only effective exit strategy will involve handing responsibilities to the host government. In this scenario, the UN support office should develop a strategy for assisting the host government's security forces from day one, working jointly with the AU mission.

However, the longer-term goal of building professional national security forces in the host state is a huge task and well beyond what a UN support office could reasonably be expected to provide. Therefore, the default assumption in such

Ideally, the UN would not provide a support package under a “service provider–client relationship” but as part of a genuine strategic partnership.

⁵⁹ Partner-owned equipment is given to TCCs by other actors (such as the US and EU) to support their operations. UNSOS is responsible for maintaining the articles of partner-owned equipment agreed by the UN, AU, and TCCs but does not provide reimbursement.

⁶⁰ Interview with former UN official, March 23, 2024.

scenarios should be that security force assistance and security sector governance programs to strengthen the host government's forces should be provided by bilateral partners, as the US, Turkey, and other actors have done in Somalia. Nevertheless, a UN support package could be designed to play a complementary but backseat role to these larger-scale bilateral initiatives by providing logistical support to host-government forces engaged in joint operations with the AU mission, as occurred in Somalia. In this scenario, the relevant activities should be integrated into the mission proposal, and it would be assumed that the

UN support package would end with the exit of foreign peacekeepers.

In contrast, in cases where the host government lacks bilateral partners willing and able to build local security forces, the UN should be willing to play a larger role. In such scenarios, two questions would arise: Should the UN mission continue such security assistance after the external peace operation has withdrawn? And how can such an arrangement be financed sustainably and predictably given that a voluntary trust fund is not a reliable funding mechanism to support such an endeavor?

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