

Joint EPON and TFP Study

From Primacy of Politics to Benchmarks

Realising UNISFA's Protection of Civilian Approach in Abyei

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Dr Andrew E. Yaw Tchie &
Dr Joana Ama Osei-Tutu



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Visiting address: C.J. Hambros plass 2d

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

Internet: effectivepeaceops.net | www.nupi.no

E-mail: info@nupi.no

Fax: [+ 47] 22 99 40 50

Tel.: [+ 47] 22 99 40 00

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From the Primacy of Politics to Benchmarks: Realising UNISFA's Protection of Civilians Approach in Abyei

Series Editor

Dr. Cedric de Coning

Authors

Dr Andrew E. Yaw Tchie and Dr Joana Ama Osei-Tutu



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Executive Summary

Situated between the disputed borders of South Sudan and Sudan, the Abyei region (also referred to as “the Box”) has been characterised by political uncertainty, insecurity, and competing claims to authority. Over the years, Abyei has become increasingly volatile, with a mix of criminal activity, large-scale seasonal incursions, armed persistent intrusion, and highly localised cross-border dynamics. These developments have not only defined everyday life in Abyei but have also become intertwined with broader conflict dynamics in both Sudan and South Sudan.

In response to tensions surrounding the region, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) established the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) through Resolution 1990 on 27 June 2011. Since its deployment, UNISFA has been mandated to maintain peace and security, support stability and development, facilitate the implementation of the Abyei Protocol, and contribute to border demarcation through the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism (JBVMM).¹ The mission has also played a critical role in supporting local governance structures and fostering engagement between communities and administrations.² However, the political and security landscape of Abyei has changed considerably since 2011, presenting new challenges for the mission.

Today, national forces from South Sudan remain present in the southern parts of the Box, while members of the Sudanese Rapid Support Forces (RSF) continue to operate in the northern

1 Tchier, A. E. Y. and Edu-Afful, F. (2024). *A forgotten people in an unstable region: Assessing the effectiveness of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA)*. EPON. <https://trainingforpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/EPON-UNISFA-Report.pdf>

2 Tchier, A. E. Y. (2025). Neglecting Local Realities: The Negative Impact of Protection in Abyei. *Journal of International Peacekeeping*, 28(3), 304-333.

areas and have sought to establish parallel governance structures. Although longstanding tensions between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya Humr communities (particularly the Falaita and Ajaira groups) have generally remained manageable in recent years,³ concerns persist that the growing presence of RSF elements has strengthened certain Misseriya constituencies in the area. This has contributed to the emergence of new armed formations, including the RSF-Misseriya and RSF-Nuer groups, who act as mercenaries. RSF-Nuer elements are increasingly involved in seasonal violence linked to cattle raiding and retaliatory attacks. Their emergence reflects an evolution in armed group activity in Abyei, building on trends that were only beginning to take shape during earlier field research conducted in 2022 and early 2023.

Violence that intensified in late 2022 contributed to the emergence of the Tit Baai self-defence forces, highlighting broader concerns about the protection of civilians (PoC) in Abyei. Many stakeholders interviewed for this study described the Tit Baai as highly organised, with a central command structure and mobilisation capacity, resembling a localised standing force capable of rapid deployment.

At the same time, the violence that intensified in late 2022 contributed to the emergence of the Tit Baai self-defence forces, highlighting broader concerns about the protection of civilians (PoC) in Abyei. Many stakeholders interviewed for this study described the Tit Baai as highly organised, with a central command structure and mobilisation capacity, resembling a localised standing force capable of rapid deployment. Their emergence is widely linked to tensions involving Twic Dinka communities in Sector South of the Box and neighbouring areas of Warrap State of South Sudan. Furthermore, earlier research found that UNISFA's inability to heed early warning signs and to implement protection responses during the 2022 violence within the Box led to the evolution of the Tit Baai.⁴ Consequently, armed mobilisation has increasingly become a means by which local and associated actors seek both protection and political attention from authorities in Juba and within Abyei itself.

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

4 Tchic. (2025). op. cit.

Despite these tensions, the Amiet Common Market remains one of the few spaces where Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities continue to interact and coexist relatively peacefully. However, rapid population growth in and around the market has raised new concerns about security, governance, crime, and the management of commercial activities in this critical economic hub.

Since 2022, the security environment in Abyei has become increasingly precarious. The ongoing conflict in Sudan has created significant governance and security vacuums that are now linked to local dynamics in Abyei. These developments have facilitated the movement of fuel (used in the Sudanese war), weapons, and other goods through the area, some of which reportedly reach RSF-linked actors operating in Darfur and the Kordofans (West, North and South). While previous research about security in the Box has traditionally focused on patrol patterns and community protection mechanisms, field research for this report indicates that existing approaches are increasingly inadequate to address the range and complexity of contemporary threats.⁵ These include organised criminal activity, illicit trafficking networks, and the daily insecurities faced by local communities.

As a result, this report has three primary objectives. First, it provides a comprehensive update on developments in Abyei between 2023 and June 2026. Second, the report examines the implications of emerging armed groups in Abyei and what these changes mean for UNISFA's mandate, particularly its responsibility to protect civilians and to maintain Abyei as a demilitarised area free from unauthorised armed actors. Third, the report analyses how UNISFA is adapting to Abyei's evolving security environment and assesses the mission's overall response to persistent and emerging violence, insecurity, and instability. Consequently, interviewees that the team engaged with in 2025 and 2026 consistently reported that criminal violence has become more brazen and intrusive. Rather than isolated incidents occurring in public spaces, "criminals come directly into your house", ⁶ and thus the violence is not just communal but also private. Although previous studies have documented rising criminality, respondents linked this trend to the Sudan conflict, which has displaced both civilians and criminal actors into Abyei. The influx of displaced persons, while primarily humanitarian, has also complicated local security assessments, with some respondents noting the difficulties in screening and distinguishing genuine "displaced persons from individuals who may be exploiting displacement movements for criminal purposes."

Beneath these immediate security concerns lies a deeper, more enduring challenge: the absence of a political settlement on Abyei's final status and a lack of a clear vision for the region's future. Many residents expressed frustration with both Sudan and South Sudan, alongside growing uncertainty about Abyei's future and the role UNISFA should play in shaping it. These

⁵ It is important to note that this does not all sit at the door of UNISFA, but the continual carving out and neglect of Abyei by both Sudan and South Sudan have contributed to these changes as well as the mission's inability to take a new PoC posture on several occasions.

⁶ Interview 015, UNISFA, April 22, 2026.

frustrations are particularly acute among young people. When combined with limited economic opportunities and high unemployment, these grievances risk fuelling criminal activity, recruitment into armed groups, and hostility towards the local administration and the UN mission.

Nevertheless, the study found broad support among communities for UNISFA's continued presence and efforts. Yet, the mission now operates in an increasingly difficult environment, characterised by declining multilateral engagement, reduced international development assistance, economic pressures, and escalating regional conflicts. Humanitarian actors have significantly reduced their presence, and cuts to programming have constrained UNISFA's ability to address community needs. As a result, many residents perceive conditions in Abyei to be worse than during the research team's previous visit in 2023.



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1. Introduction

The Protection of Civilians (PoC) mandate and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda remain vital components of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping efforts. Incorporating PoC and WPS mandates enables UN Peacekeeping Operations (UN PKO) to provide more inclusive, gender-sensitive protection to vulnerable populations in fragile and failing states and non-state settings, with an emphasis on sustainable stability and peace. Adapting to these evolving circumstances is crucial for UN Missions to remain relevant and to meet their inclusive protection objectives successfully. This requires better support, more effective resource allocation, and the use of available resources.

The conflict in Abyei has lasted over 50 years and displaced about 90 per cent of the population.⁷ In response, the UNISFA was created by the UNSC in June 2011 to monitor the ceasefire and the demilitarisation of the Abyei area, or “the Box”. Abyei is located on the border between South Sudan and Sudan, has been accorded “special administrative status” under the 2004 Protocol on the Resolution of the Abyei Conflict in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which ended the Second Sudanese Civil War.⁸ The UNSC supported this agreement and authorised the deployment of the UNISFA force in Resolution 1990 (2011), which included 4,200 military peacekeepers, mostly Ethiopian troops.⁹

7 UN OCHA. (2003). Consolidated Inter-agency appeal 2003: Sudan. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/478385/files/sudan03.pdf>; Okech, F. (2025). “We don’t have protection”: The worsening crisis in disputed Abyei. *The New Humanitarian*. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2025/03/03/we-dont-have-protection-worsening-crisis-disputed-abyei>; UN. (2011). Sudan: Number of people displaced from Abyei rises to nearly 100,000. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2011/06/377632>

8 Zapata. (2013). op. cit.

9 UNSC Resolution S/RES/1990. <https://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1990>

In a letter from the Secretary-General to the Security Council in August 2018, UNISFA was considered “one of the best-performing peacekeeping missions”,¹⁰ having implemented various mechanisms. For example, to ensure security and PoC in Abyei, UNISFA promoted dialogue between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities, and, more recently, between the Ngok Dinka and Twic Dinka communities. The mission also focused on supporting the Community Protection Committees (CPCs), the Joint Protection Committee’s monitoring and early warning mechanisms, and the Joint Community Peace Committee (JCPC). In terms of protection, the mission reports that it conducts regular patrols and engages in dialogue with government officials from the Government of Sudan (GoS), the Government of South Sudan (GoSS), and the Revitalised-Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU).¹¹ However, today the context in Abyei has changed and is evolving rapidly, with the war in both Sudan (Khartoum) and the failed peace processes in South Sudan continuing to undermine progress. In addition to strengthening security in the Box, UNISFA assisted with overall coordination and supported the JBVMM, established by GoS and GoSS under the July 30, 2011, Agreement.¹² The mission was also mandated to contribute an observer force to the JBVMM for protection, logistics, and air support, which has led to weapon confiscations and other protection ‘successes’ in the past.¹³

While the security situation in Abyei remains unpredictable, the emergence of new security threats, including those stemming from the Sudan crisis, particularly the encroachment of RSF elements into the Box, has further complicated the situation.

As a result, the deployment of UNISFA has led scholars to argue that its PoC operations and projected favourable troop-to-population ratios have contributed to its notable success. However, much of this analysis neglects the fact that the mission has had to acclimate to new forms of criminality, violence and actor dynamics—such as the use of local and neighbouring militia for hire. On November 14, 2025, the UNSC decided to extend the mandate of UNISFA until November 15, 2026, to maintain the Force’s authorised troop and police ceilings. It should be noted that Resolution 2802 (2025) was adopted by a vote of 12 in favour and three abstentions (China, Pakistan and the Russian Federation).¹⁴ However, the context for achieving mandated benchmarks should be assessed against the mission’s outstanding deployment requirements, particularly the continued shortfall in authorised Formed Police Units (FPU), which has constrained operational effectiveness and hindered the full implementation of key mandated tasks.

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

11 UNSC Resolution S/2012/722. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/report-secretary-general-situation-abyei-s2012722>, p. 4.

12 UNSC Resolution S/2011/510. <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2011/510>

13 Ibid, p. 3.

14 UNSC Resolution S/2025/2802. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4093196?v=pdf>

While the security situation in Abyei remains unpredictable, the emergence of new security threats, including those stemming from the Sudan crisis, particularly the encroachment of RSF elements into the Box, has further complicated the situation. Similarly, persistent instability in South Sudan, community conflicts, and the Twic-Ngok conflict have led to the South Sudan People's Defence Forces' (SSPDF) extended presence in Abyei, further complicating the overall security and political outlook. The persistent conflict dynamics stemming from inter-communal tensions, hired armed elements, the prevalence of sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV), and humanitarian and development challenges (food insecurity, limited livelihood opportunities, limited access to education, healthcare and water, and high rates of trauma and psychological distress) continue to set the region back. Recent funding cuts have set back humanitarian and development actors in Abyei, with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Food Programme (WFP) all closing their offices in parts of Abyei and moving the management of all Abyei operations to South Sudan. The only agencies partially operating in the region are currently Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the Danish Refugee Council (South Sudan), Concordis International (a UK-based international non-government organisation (INGO)), and Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART).

In Sudan and South Sudan, the WPS landscape is shaped by entrenched patriarchal structures that reinforce gender inequality and enable diverse forms of SGBV, including rape, sexual abuse, female genital mutilation, forced and child marriage, and inter-community abductions of women. Despite the prevalence of these violations, SGBV in the Abyei Box remains significantly under-reported. Between 1 March 2025 and 31 March 2026, the UN Police (UNPOL) recorded sexual assault cases, including seven cases of rape, one attempted gang rape, and seven defilements, figures that likely underrepresent the scale of the problem. These forms of violence occur across borders, with agencies such as UNFPA South Sudan also incorporating Abyei into their reporting.¹⁵ The presence of displaced persons, including survivors of the Sudan conflict, further compounds vulnerabilities, as reflected in OHCHR reporting.¹⁶ Additional concerns are raised in the conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and children and armed conflict (CAAC) reports of the respective Special Representatives, which list parties operating in the area. In the absence of formal rule-of-law institutions, traditional justice mechanisms dominate, often reinforcing discriminatory norms and gender hierarchies and providing forms of justice that do not take into consideration the needs of the victims, especially women.

Consequently, questions have arisen about how the mission implements its PoC and WPS mandates in an area that is consistently in flux. Locals have criticised UNISFA's ability to fulfil its mandate concerning protecting civilians and advancing women's participation and leadership, often seen as sporadic in an environment where spontaneous violence remains very high.¹⁷

15 UNSC. (2026). Report to the Secretary-General, Situation in Abyei, 4 May. S/2026/378. <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2140713/n2609629.pdf>

16 UN Human Rights Council. (n.d.). Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffm-sudan/index>

17 Tchier and Edu-Afful. (2024). op. cit.



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Others have called for UNISFA to do more under UNSC S/RES/2802 (2025), which calls for ensuring women are a part of the dialogues.¹⁸ In this regard, significant progress has been made in recent migration-related dialogues, in which women represented 30 per cent of participants and played a key role in shaping conflict management mechanisms and processes. However, how diverse are these meetings, and how often do they include the same groups of women?

Locals have criticised UNISFA's ability to fulfil its mandate concerning protecting civilians and advancing women's participation and leadership, often seen as sporadic in an environment where spontaneous violence remains very high.

Additionally, the mission's personnel received the Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award and the Woman Police Officer of the Year Award in 2025.¹⁹ There remains limited understanding of how the mission has implemented the WPS mandate and sustained these achievements,

¹⁸ UNSC Resolution S/2025/2802. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4093196?v=pdf>, p. 3.

¹⁹ UN Peacekeeping. (2025). Peacekeepers in Abyei Win Top United Nations Military, Police Awards. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/press-releases/peacekeepers-in-abyei-win-top-united-nations-military-police-awards>

particularly following the loss of its civilian Gender Adviser. In addition, how has it adapted its PoC strategy and approach to the current context, and what valuable lessons can be drawn for other UN Peacekeeping Missions operating in highly dynamic contexts across the African continent? Finally, as the WPS agenda faces threats and de-prioritisation by some states, how is it being championed and sustained by the mission?

The report examines the implications of emerging armed groups for UNISFA's mandate, particularly its responsibility to protect civilians and to maintain Abyei as a demilitarised area free from unauthorised armed actors. Central to this analysis is an assessment of how UNISFA operationalises its PoC mandate across the tiers of its PoC strategy.

This joint Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) and Training for Peace Programme (TfP) study aims to bridge the gap between policy and practice by providing actionable insights into how UNISFA implements its PoC mandate, with a focus on the aspects of its PoC tiers related to the WPS, to operationalise the mission's mandate and the broader goals derived from the WPS agenda, based on the thematic pillars: prevention, participation, and protection. The report has three primary objectives. First, it provides a comprehensive update on developments in Abyei between 2023 and June 2026. The research draws on interviews with more than 40 senior UN personnel, mission staff, and diplomats, as well as over 50 civilian respondents and multiple focus group discussions (FGDs).²⁰ It also builds upon field visits conducted in 2025 and 2026, including research examining the effects of climate change on UNISFA's ability to deliver its mandate.²¹ Thus, the report builds not only on the team's extensive field visit in May 2026 but also on personal interaction and over a year's worth of engagement with communities, mission personnel, and stakeholders across Abyei to ensure that the analysis accurately reflects the issues raised by all groups in the Box. Second, the report examines the implications of emerging armed groups for UNISFA's mandate, particularly its responsibility to protect civilians and to maintain Abyei as a demilitarised area free from unauthorised armed actors. Central to this analysis is an assessment of how UNISFA operationalises its PoC mandate across the tiers of its PoC strategy. The report also explores the relationship between PoC implementation and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. It does so by examining how the mission advances the WPS pillars of prevention, participation, and protection within its broader mandate framework. Third, the report analyses how UNISFA is adapting to Abyei's evolving security environment. Moving beyond a narrow focus on PoC and WPS, it assesses the mission's overall response to persistent and emerging violence, insecurity, and instability.

²⁰ Please see the research design section of this report.

²¹ Tchier, A.E.Y and Seyuba, K. (Forthcoming). Beyond the Blue Line: Tackling Climate, Peace, and Security Challenges in Abyei.

Ultimately, this report seeks not only to provide an updated examination of conditions in Abyei but also to evaluate whether UNISFA's current approach remains fit for purpose. As the security landscape continues to evolve, a central question that emerges is whether the mission's existing strategies, capabilities, and responses are adequate to address the increasingly complex challenges confronting Abyei today.

Through analysis, the report proposes the following key recommendations for UNISFA to:

- Strengthen community-based early warning and protection mechanisms through closer collaboration with local communities, women, youth, and traditional leaders.
- Improve rapid response capabilities by enhancing mobility, decentralising deployments, and increasing mission presence in high-risk and underserved areas.
- Institutionalise mission-wide accountability for WPS implementation through clear indicators, reporting mechanisms, and leadership oversight.
- Expand women's participation in peace and security processes while simultaneously engaging male allies to support inclusive decision-making.²²
- Invest in the capacity of local security and governance institutions, including community protection structures and local policing mechanisms, to support sustainable protection outcomes.
- Enhance the civilian and political dimensions of mission engagement to address governance challenges, facilitate dialogue, and support long-term solutions to Abyei's unresolved status.

The study will explore how UNISFA carries out its PoC and WPS mandates while responding to the evolving security situation in its context. The central thematic areas above are linked to specific questions that the study seeks to explore and better understand. The critical questions are outlined below.

Protection of Civilians (PoC)

- a. What lessons can be learnt from how UNISFA engages with and implements its PoC mandate in Abyei across the different sectors?
- b. What are the successes and challenges of this strategy?
- c. Is the mission able to provide effective physical protection to all communities across the Abyei Box?

²² This recommendation is made taking into account that UNISFA may not be able to unilaterally change traditional power structures in Abyei.

- d. Has UNISFA's community engagement and dialogue improved security?
- e. How does the lack of local police and security institutions impact UNISFA's ability to strengthen the protective environment in Abyei?
- f. How effective is the mission in protecting civilians?
- g. What could the mission do better to protect civilians, especially from the perspective of state and non-state actors?

Women, Peace and Security (WPS)

- h. What strategy does the mission have in place to deliver on the WPS agenda (participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery), including its approach to supporting women's participation in peace processes, integrating gender perspectives into day-to-day community engagements, and implementing gender-sensitive military operations?
- i. How does the mission integrate WPS into its work, considering the robust WPS language and the evolving operational context?
- j. What are the strategic functions for uniformed components in the advancement of the WPS agenda?
- k. How does the mission's monitoring and evaluation system factor WPS into its activities and ensure that it is a mission-wide agenda?

Evolving Security

- l. How does the mission deliver on its security and protection features and respond to rapidly evolving situations?
- m. How does UNISFA adapt to the security situation in Abyei, and what resources does it draw on to adapt?



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2. Research Design

The study will utilise the 2019 EPON methodological framework, adapting it to the selected case of UNISFA (and Abyei) and the context it draws on. Additional data was collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and FGDs, conducted both remotely and in person in Abyei. The research team visited UNISFA in May 2026 and conducted interviews with UN personnel and staff across the three sectors in which UNISFA operates. To conduct the study, the authors carefully discussed a range of methodological options applicable to the case of UNISFA, building on their past engagement with UNISFA in 2022, 2023, and 2025. Following discussions with other researchers familiar with the UNISFA context, the research team adopted a mixed-methods approach combining desk research, semi-structured interviews, individual interviews, and FGDs, including in-country fieldwork, with an estimated total of more than 100 interviews conducted for this study.

The research process spanned from March 2025 (as part of another upcoming report on climate, peace and security) to August 2026. The team's May 2026 interaction included visiting all three sectors, according to the UN demarcations of operations, to conduct interviews with various groups. The senior mission leadership team, officials from Juba appointed to the local administration, the CPC team, JCPC, JCPC sub-committees, joint courts, Joint Peace Committee (JPC), Mission Sector South, North and Centre Commanders, and mission chiefs were consulted. Local ministers, traditional chiefs, youth unions and associates, women representatives, persons with disabilities, displaced peoples and their representatives, other civil society groups, and local and international non-government organisations (NGOs) were also included.

Desk Research and Actor Mapping

The authors began by compiling a comprehensive list of experts, civil society organisations (CSOs) and government officials, with input from the mission. This mapping exercise helped identify key respondents, institutions, and individuals to engage with. At the same time, the authors conducted a desk review of existing literature on UNISFA and Abyei, including online materials, academic articles, books, and policy reports on the political and institutional history of Abyei. Insights from this desk review enabled the authors to refine the initial mapping and further identify actors within and beyond the UN frameworks, including the Governments of Sudan and South Sudan, in both the past and the present.

Online Interviews

Building on the actor mapping approach, the authors conducted online interviews that included in-depth discussions with various stakeholders on key themes identified during the desk review stage. The interviews were conducted via Teams and Zoom; in some cases, due to connectivity issues, the team resorted to WhatsApp. On average, interviews lasted 45 to 55 minutes. During this stage of the data collection process, respondents were fully informed of the study's aims and given the opportunity to opt out. However, all agreed to participate and were forthcoming with their responses. Through the online interviews, the team used the snowballing approach to gather additional names for interviews.

In-country Fieldwork

The third method involved in-country and in-person interviews in May 2026. Working from a previous list and in close coordination with the mission Community Liaison Officers (CLOs), the authors developed the list of possible respondents. The authors engaged a broad spectrum of actors, including political opposition leaders, CLOs, government-appointed officials, CSO representatives, women leaders, advocacy groups, military personnel as part of UNISFA's deployment, the chief justice, CPC, and business leaders. The number of respondents reflects those willing to give their time for an interview. The intensity of the fieldwork, beginning early in the morning and running late into the evenings and on weekends, enabled the team to conduct many interviews over the course of seven days. After the visit, the team entered a period of further online interviews, data analysis, and drafting. The process included several layers of analysis to ensure that the draft was accurate and reflected the views of the people of Abyei.

Analytical Approach

The report adopts a deductive approach, guided by predetermined themes from the literature and established evaluation questions. Deductive reasoning enabled the team to structure the data around core analytical categories while remaining open to new insights from the fieldwork. This approach was particularly useful for examining the interplay between structures and agency across protection, PoC, and WPS engagement, recognising how institutional practices and individual actors continuously shape one another. The analysis combines theoretically informed analysis with empirical evidence from the fieldwork. Finally, all interviews have been anonymised to encourage open and honest participation and to ensure respondents' security and privacy. As a result, this report builds on existing qualitative research and past field trips conducted by the authors, and supplements this literature with desk interviews, online interviews, and field research trips to Abyei in May 2026.

Following the introduction and this section on research design, section 3 explores the adoption of benchmarks and the need for UNISFA to meet these for its mandate to be renewed. More specifically, it explores UNISFA's mandate language, the benchmarks it must achieve, and the approaches the mission is taking to implement its strategy. Section 4 explores the mission's PoC mandate and then examines UNISFA's approach to PoC. It discusses how the mission deploys physical protection and the effectiveness of its PoC approach. The subsections also briefly explore relevant mission units' work and, by extension, how the mission sustains protection through community engagement (with the CLO) and local dialogue mechanisms, including conferences, as well as its humanitarian assistance.

Section 5 explores the thematic area of WPS and analyses how the mission supports the participation and inclusion of women in local dialogue and mediation. It examines how the mission utilises its female engagement teams and uncovers some of the disproportionate challenges of this underutilised tool. The section assesses how the mission supports women's representation in community structures, as well as some of the mission's successes and challenges in monitoring and accountability for WPS and PoC. Section 6 goes deeper to explore how the mission responds to the evolving security situation and to PoC and WPS within this context. It looks at the mission's ability to draw on its early warning and early response mechanisms, which it adapts to operational challenges and constraints. The final section provides recommendations and concluding thoughts.



Image: Joana Ama Osei-Tutu, 2026

3. From the Primacy of Politics to the Primacy of Benchmarks

Language and the Mandate

The UNISFA mandate and clauses, as per UNSC S/RES/2762 (2024), can be broken down into 35 operational paragraphs (OPs) (see Annexure A for the full mandate). The operational aspects of protection are clustered across several areas and mentioned nine times in the mandate clauses gathered below in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Operational paragraphs (OPs) for UNISFA²³

A. Humanitarian Access	
OP25	Demands all parties allow—in accordance with international law and international humanitarian law (IHL)—full, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access to civilians and protection of all UN and associated humanitarian personnel, consistent with the UN humanitarian principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence), and in line with UNSC Resolution 2730 (2024).
B. Actions Directed at UNISFA	
OP 30 (b)	Employ confidence-building, mediation, and strategic communications to support protection and situational awareness.
(c)	Prioritise mission mobility and active patrolling in areas of emerging protection risks, including SGBV; deploy forces with appropriate air and land assets.
(k)	Prioritise mandated protection activities in all resource allocation decisions (as per Resolution 1894 (2009)).
(o)	Mainstream child protection as a crosscutting issue.
C. Humanitarian Work and PoC	
OP 22	Welcomes UNISFA's efforts to strengthen CPCs in coordination with the Misseriya and Ngok Dinka communities.
D. WPS	
OP 21	Calls upon all parties to promote full, equal, meaningful, and safe participation of women at all levels of intercommunity dialogue; requests UNISFA to integrate women into peace discussions and facilitate access to local women's organisations (including gender and child protection advisers).

23 UNSC Resolution S/2762 (2024). [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2762\(2024\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2762(2024))

Overall troop and police numbers available to meet the UNISFA mandate for the Abyei area did not decrease. However, UNSC Resolution 2802 (2025) extended the mission until November 15, 2026, while linking its future directly to strict benchmarks that require Sudan and South Sudan to demonstrate actual progress in demilitarisation. Regarding the connection between mandate extension and fulfilling benchmarks, some respondents felt: “the mission is being assessed against benchmarks that are not primarily under its purview.” Another noted that UNSC Resolution 2802 (2025) is an important resolution.²⁴ The mission primarily covers 13 critical areas:

1. Demilitarisation and security;
2. JBVMM and border monitoring;
3. Political process and the Joint Political and Security Mechanism (JPSM);
4. Rule of law and police;
5. PoC;
6. Community engagement and peacebuilding;
7. Humanitarian support;
8. Human rights and accountability;
9. Conduct and standards;
10. Operational effectiveness and mission support;
11. Strategic coordination and reporting;
12. Mine action; and
13. Public information.

Linked to this are the specific benchmarks for each area of operation. For example, concerning demilitarisation and security, there should be a complete withdrawal of all unauthorised forces by August 2026.²⁵ These new ways of measuring success (benchmarks) can also lead to an arbitrary approach and systems being put in place, resulting in methods, decisions, or strategies that lack a systematic, rational, or evidence-based foundation. Consequently, respondents noted that, although mission staff are aware of UNISFA’s mandate, its implementation in area one is often rationalised as the “number of patrols against [those] planned, including gender-responsive patrols conducted”, in line with OP 1 and OP 30(c). Thus, “if we conduct at least 90% coverage

²⁴ Interview 001, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

²⁵ See OP 1(a) and OP 16.

as per the patrol plan”,²⁶ the mission has achieved partial success. The problem with these types of mandates and their subsequent tasks is that, when they are converted into the UNISFA Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System (CPAS) Result Measurement Framework, as per S/RES/2762 (2024), the human element of the work that a UN PKO does diminishes, and it simply becomes about the targets.

Consequently, respondents noted that, although mission staff are aware of UNISFA’s mandate, its implementation in area one is often rationalised as the “number of patrols against [those] planned, including gender-responsive patrols conducted”, in line with OP 1 and OP 30(c). Thus, “if we conduct at least 90% coverage as per the patrol plan”.

Another example is JBVMM and border monitoring, which is linked to a “percentage of SDBZ [safe demilitarised border zones] monitored regularly (patrols)”, where the benchmark becomes “100% coverage with weekly patrols of all border sectors”, as per OP 3 and OP 4(1). However, there is a need to adjust the types of patrols continually, as they are human-centric and they should not just become a tick-box exercise. The same is even more stark for the PoC, where the mandate can be interpreted as the “Number of civilians directly protected through patrols/presence”, and the benchmark or target is designed around “100% of identified high-risk areas covered weekly”, in line with OP 15 and OP 30(c). However, this highly technical, robotic way of understanding events can lead to mixed results. As one respondent that the team engaged with noted, “The current mandate is not only about resolving issues through politics and other mandated tasks but increasingly about demonstrated progress on benchmarks”.²⁷

A respondent noted that while the mission is pursuing the five benchmarks at the moment, the South Sudan April 2 letter reiterates the longstanding positions of Juba (on the rejection of joint institutions and the Abyei Police Service, for example), and indicates South Sudan’s commitment to implementing the demilitarisation, JPSM, and Civilian Deputy Head of Mission (DHoM) benchmarks.

26 UNSC. (2026). UN Interim Security Force for Abyei: Briefing and Consultations. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2026/05/un-interim-security-force-for-abyei-briefing-and-consultations-2.php>

27 Interview 001, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.



Chinese QRF UNISFA 3

Another respondent noted that while the mission is pursuing the five benchmarks at the moment, the South Sudan April 2 letter²⁸ reiterates the longstanding positions of Juba (on the rejection of joint institutions and the Abyei Police Service, for example), and indicates South Sudan's commitment to implementing the demilitarisation, JPSM, and Civilian Deputy Head of Mission (DHoM) benchmarks. It is here where the mission can struggle to manage the dynamics of Abyei. A more specific example is area six, which focuses on community engagement and peacebuilding, both of which are critical for communities in Abyei. However, when reviewing the mission results for the area or performance indicator, one of the areas is simply converted into the "Number of intercommunal dialogue forums convened", with the target benchmark being a "Minimum [of] 4 forums per quarter across all regions", in line with OP 18 and OP 20. However, each area has specific challenges that require a targeted response and engagement. The success of engagement cannot and should not be restricted to a "minimum number"; this vague approach (connected to a wider strategy) distorts some of the realities that the mission is faced with, but more broadly limits the mission's ability to fully engage beyond the surface level. Additionally, this approach does not inspire key staff, such as the mission's CLO, to be innovative and adaptive in their community engagement and peacebuilding. It also means that as the mission rushes towards meeting its benchmarks, it can enter a negative spiral that

²⁸ Interview 003, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

ignores key events and neglects or risks brushing aside some of the local realities that continue to drive the dynamics in Abyei over the next two to three years. As a result, the benchmarks do not support the mission's overall goals. Consequently, political challenges in Abyei can lead to losses, affecting UNISFA's ability to advance its political efforts.

The mission has increasingly relied on targeted, high-impact engagements, leveraging existing coordination platforms and strengthening collaboration with partners such as the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and local community structures.

Supporting these findings were the views of interviewees, who noted that the mission has increasingly relied on targeted, high-impact engagements, leveraging existing coordination platforms and strengthening collaboration with partners such as the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and local community structures, which the report will discuss later. Financial constraints, including adjustments in operational and air assets, have led UNISFA, it is claimed, “to adopt a more targeted and prioritised approach to political engagement, with a stronger focus on key locations and strategic stakeholders, including in remote and sensitive areas”. However, outside of engagements with local community leaders, often focused on local needs, it is not clear how much strategic work the mission has undertaken under the current leadership in engaging with South Sudan (more publicly) versus the authorities in Sudan. The later sections of this report will aim to explore this. However, it is important to note that the mission has engaged with respective governments from Khartoum and Juba, with one respondent noting that “the FCs [Force Commanders] have travelled to both capitals more than four times over the past year”. While it can be argued that these adjustments have “encouraged greater prioritisation and strategic focus, enhancing the effectiveness and coherence of political outreach,” it is not clear that these changes are effective, given that the number of armed groups is increasing and the political mission has not achieved significant engagement to move the situation forward beyond where it was in 2023.

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Introduction of Benchmarks

While the mission did not drop its mandate per se, it did, however, inherit benchmarks, which are the conditions for Mandate Renewal in the Abyei area. These benchmarks are linked to OP 1 and OP 4, as given in Table 3.2 and 3.3, respectively. The UN Secretary-General is required to report by 31 August 2026 on demonstrable progress (OP 35).

Table 3.2: OP 1 benchmark conditions for UNISFA mandate renewal (Abyei Area)²⁹

Ref.	Benchmark Condition
OP 1(a)	Demilitarisation: Withdrawal of all unauthorised armed forces and achievement of full demilitarisation, including through disarmament programs
OP 1(b)	JPSM meetings: Resumption and documentation of JPSM meetings with dates, participation records, and outcomes
OP 1(c)	Abyei Joint Security Police: Establishment by September 2026, including recruitment, training, deployment, and temporary administrative and security arrangements
OP 1(d)	Visa Issuance: Issuance of visas for prompt deployment of 640 police personnel (148 individual officers and three FPU's)
OP 1(e)	Civilian Deputy Head of Mission (DHoM): Support for prompt appointment of a civilian DHoM

Table 3.3: OP 4 benchmark conditions for JBVMM mandate continuation³⁰

Ref.	Benchmark Condition
OP 4(1)	Full freedom of movement for all air and ground UNISFA and JBVMM patrols guaranteed by both parties
OP 4(2)	Operationalise team site at Abu Qussa/Wunkur; resolve challenges at Gok Machar, Safaha/Kiir Adem, and Sumayah/War Abar
OP 4(3)	Convene two JPSM meetings and widely disseminate conclusions to all stakeholders
OP 4(4)	Immediate withdrawal of all forces from SDBZ, in line with October 2020 JPSM commitment; notify UNISFA for verification
OP 4(5)	Operationalise border-crossing corridors, as per decisions from October 2020 and September 2021 JPSM meetings
OP 4(6)	Develop a detailed work plan and budget for demarcation; hold two Joint Demarcation Committee meetings
OP 4(7)	Maintain deployment of national monitors from both Sudan and South Sudan to JBVMM operations

²⁹ See UNISFA's mandate and benchmark document.

³⁰ The JBVMM currently has no personnel deployed on the ground within the SDBZ, but remains semi-operational and continues to function under the leadership of the Deputy Force Commander (DFC). The mechanism is undergoing restructuring, including consideration of the integration of additional technological assets to support its monitoring functions. Meanwhile, staff at Headquarters continue to conduct remote monitoring and reporting, while National Monitors provide weekly briefings to Mission Leadership through the Joint Military Operations Centre (JMOC).

Each operational area is ranked against a weight or percentage weight, with progress reported in February and August 2026. While the introduction of benchmarks may provide some strategic focus for the mission, further conditions for UNISFA's continued presence may be created that are difficult to meet in the short term. This can contribute to a decline in the mission's overall ability to carry out PoC and WPS, since these can be viewed as tasks rather than strategic planning in line with the wider mandate and the mission's strategy. More broadly, interviewees noted that while these are useful, the mission must focus on a few priorities to meet the benchmark, rather than on the holistic approach needed to support security and stability in the region, which is key to achieving sustained peace in Abyei. The US finances the mission and has pushed a benchmarked accountability approach – reflecting frustration with the lack of progress on the final status, demilitarisation and bilateral engagement. However, the lack of a holistic approach means that regional problems become the responsibility of UNISFA, which it cannot deal with alone.

In essence, penalising UNISFA for failures driven by Sudan and South Sudan does not support or contribute to wider peace. Sudan and South Sudan, for the most part, have not adequately engaged with each other on the situation in Abyei, and they have rarely engaged on a state-to-state level, beyond the issue of certain appointments. For benchmarks to be successful and to be linked to the mission's effectiveness, the mission needs reliable logistics, freedom of movement for its forces, access to sensitive areas, community confidence, situational awareness, and the ability to sustain deterrence – all of which have been increasingly strained.

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31 Interview 009, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

The strategic use of benchmarks poses additional challenges for the mission. Firstly, because the benchmarks that are contingent on both states are not being met, the mission could be forced by the penholder into a premature drawdown, which would weaken UNISFA and create space for more non-state actors to flood Abyei. Second, because civilians are primarily at risk of harm in a security void, this could lead to greater arms uptake and instability in the Box, especially where protection becomes crucial for survival. As was evident in 2022, the emergence of self-defence militias is highly likely. Third, with the Sudan conflict blocking the flow of goods from North to South, Abyei becomes a critical route for the RSF in the south.

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Approaches to Strategy Implementation

UNISFA has seen some changes under the past Head of Mission (HoM), Major General Affram. Many of the respondents explained that Affram helped turn things around and change the approach of the mission to be more community-inclusive and collaborative. This approach, it appears, has contributed to a relative level of calm among the community leaders whom the team engaged with. For example, they noted: “information was continually shared between us and decisions were explained in detail.”³² This level of trust and collaboration between the mission and communities was evident during the visit, along with a strong desire for UNISFA to continue its mandate. Nevertheless, while many respondents indicated that the situation has improved, they also warned that Abyei is at a “tipping point”,³³ that the crisis in Sudan is impacting PoC in Abyei, and that UNISFA’s ability to respond remains limited. The mission has tried to pivot and focus on benchmarks to meet its requirements. However, there are aspects it does not control that impact its overall ability to apply the strategy in support of PoC and protection more broadly.

The mounting challenges ahead of the mission, which are internal to Abyei, hinder the mission’s ability to ensure its strategy is implemented effectively and sustainably. Adding to this complexity is the frequent presence of armed elements from both Sudan and South Sudan. Armed actors have settled or play a cross-border hybrid role by often entering, while others, such as criminal gangs, seem to use Abyei as a location for rest and recuperation. The repeated entry of these armed elements into the Box indicates rising tensions.³⁴ For example, as one respondent noted, while there are UNISFA forces in Sector North, the relative levels of security are not due to the TCCs based there, but the native administration in collaboration with the RSF. Some see the lack of security stemming from the mission’s presence in this sector as an indication of “intentions to withdraw from this area, and this gives criminals opportunities to achieve their activities”.³⁵ Other respondents in this sector noted that the RSF was welcomed by Misseriya groups into the Box to serve as a semi-self-protective force for the Misseriya at a later date.³⁶ Although the RSF was invited in with the support of some Misseriya leaders, they are now divided. The Declaration of Intent to support the demilitarisation of Abyei, signed by the JCPC in April, is a clear call for RSF withdrawal. According to one respondent, “Misseriya JCPC leaders call for RSF withdrawal and have expressed this demand to the RSF leadership at the highest level”, as also reported by UNISFA in a recent defence sector reform (DSR).

Whether both scenarios are true or not, the broader concern is that the mission strategy is not adaptive enough to respond to this rising tension in advance, beyond telling armed elements

32 Interview 011, Abyei, May 22, 2026.

33 Interview 004, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

34 Ibid.

35 Interview 007, UNISFA, May 24, 2026.

36 Interview 007, Diffra leaders, May 24, 2026.

“not [to] carry weapons when moving inside the Box”.³⁷ When the team asked respondents about the mission’s ability to adapt to changing dynamics, many noted that leadership, past and present, had been focused on “maintaining the status quo, not rocking the boat”, as well as the mission’s everyday engagement.³⁸ Consequently, it is unclear whether the mission has a broader strategy linked to the benchmarks to respond in times of crisis, and/or whether it has the level of preparedness, through its mandate, strategy, and benchmarks, to respond to a violent emergency. Additionally, whatever the mission’s abilities or outcome, there is a caveat: if the mission were to be dissolved, then more focus should be placed on implementing: (i) the political aspects of its mandate and finalising the status of Abyei; and (ii) designing a mechanism for immediate PoC.

The next section of the report delves deeper into these aspects by examining the mission’s PoC approach and how it aims to provide physical protection in the event of a crisis. The section more specifically examines the effectiveness of UNISFA’s PoC and protection approach, how it secures and sustains this protective environment, and whether it can harness dialogue to emerge with community-based protection approaches.



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37 Interview 001, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

38 Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

4. UNISFA's Protection of Civilians (PoC) Approach

Physical Protection

All UN Missions with a UNSC Chapter VII mandate are required to have a PoC strategy; these strategies provide strategic guidance to mission components on approaches to and implementation of the PoC mandate, as per various UNSC resolutions. For UNISFA, these Chapter VII Resolutions on PoC are captured in 1990 (2011), 2024 (2011), 2032 (2011), 2046 (2012), 2047 (2012), 2075 (2012), 2104 (2013), 2126 (2013), 2156 (2014), 2179 (2014), and 2205 (2015). In a context such as Abyei, it is crucial that the mission has a working PoC strategy, given that “UNISFA is the only formal institution providing PoC operations in the Abyei Area”.³⁹ The current PoC strategy is focused on five strategic priorities:

- Strategic Priority 1: Physical protection of civilians and facilitating humanitarian assistance;
- Strategic Priority 2: Support to the political process between Sudan and South Sudan;
- Strategic Priority 3: Local-level mediation to address intercommunal conflict;
- Strategic Priority 4: Peacebuilding activities to address the root causes of conflict; and
- Strategic Priority 5: Support the Rule of Law, promoting accountability and access to Justice.

39 UNISFA PoC Strategy 2023.

In addition, UNISFA's PoC strategy is guided by the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) Policy on PoC, which provides the conceptual framework for the implementation of protection mandates based on three tiers:

- Tier I: Protection through dialogue and engagement;
- Tier II: Provision of physical protection; and
- Tier III: Establishment of a protective environment.

To enhance the PoC strategy, UNISFA has adopted an Early Warning (EW) Mechanism that is designed to:

- a. Alert decision makers to the potential outbreak, escalation and resurgence of violent conflict; and
- b. Promote an understanding among decision makers of the nature and impacts of violent conflict.

The EW Mechanism is currently being revised by the CLO. It involves the regular collection and analysis of data on conflicts and systematically monitoring and reporting conflict indicators to Senior Management for action. The strategy is also hinged on data points from, for example, CPAS, which would enable UNISFA to assess impact against the mandate and to plan and prioritise activities more effectively, in response to an ongoing analysis of the context. The Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise (SAGE), launched in February 2023, is also used by the Joint Operations Centre (JOC) and the Joint Mission Analysis Centre (JMAC) for this purpose.

In 2023, UNISFA adopted its PoC strategy for the period October 2023 to October 2024. The strategy was ambitious and designed to harness technology to feed into the EW Mechanism. As one UN personnel noted, “it was an ambitious strategy with the ability to do really well and use data to better drive the mission’s overall approach to PoC”.⁴⁰ In 2023, the UN’s Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) issued an internal audit report critiquing UNISFA’s efforts.⁴¹ An OIOS 2024 review also noted:

[...] the revised draft PoC strategy cascaded from the mandate to inform the mission concept and operationalized a whole-of-mission PoC approach through three tiers according to mission components and in alignment with the 2023 PoC policy and the 2020 PoC handbook.⁴²

⁴⁰ Interview 009, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

⁴¹ OIOS. (2023). Audit of procurement and contract management in the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei. https://oios.un.org/system/files/confidential-files/Reports/2023_055_pd.pdf

⁴² OIOS. (2024). Outcome Evaluation of the Implementation of the Protection of Civilians Mandate by the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA). https://www.unevaluation.org/member_publications/outcome-evaluation-implementation-protection-civilians-mandate-united-nations, p. 6.

However, the 2024 review also went on to state:

[...] the draft strategy was unclear on (1) how threat assessment would be determined and prioritized within the broad coordination of different components and sections, early warning mechanisms, and community engagement; (2) how the components would adapt outlined implementation measures based on the changing security dynamics; (3) how the lessons learned assessments would be conducted; and (4) identifying measurable results that can be systematically benchmarked to monitor impact.⁴³

Later, in 2026, a UN General Assembly report stated:

In its audit of rule of law support activities in the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) (2025/080), OIOS concluded that, although the mission had improved detention infrastructure, mainstreamed gender considerations and reported activities accurately, the rule of law strategy lacked clear activities with measurable indicators and mitigation plans for identified risks.⁴⁴

On the subject of procurement, the UN General Assembly also reported that a 2025 audit (2025/057) found that “the Mission lacked reliable inventory data and had not fully validated existing usable stock before initiating procurements, resulting in excess acquisitions and unutilized inventory”.⁴⁵

During the team’s field visit, the discussion centred on a revised strategy that was not yet approved. The revision of the PoC strategy, it was stated, was designed to address all new challenges and promote more integration. In 2025, the mission activated the PoC Working Group (WG), which brings together all components. The CLO now takes part in the mission’s weekly patrol planning meeting, which informs patrols and the mission’s deployment.

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⁴³ Ibid, p. 7.

⁴⁴ UN General Assembly. (2026). Activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on peace operations for the period from 1 January to 31 December 2025. Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services. https://oios.un.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/a_30_332_partii16feb2026.pdf, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 10.

patrol planning meeting, which informs patrols and the mission's deployment. Prior to the patrol planning meeting, the CLO consults with relevant community stakeholders to hear their concerns and identify current high-risk areas. However, engagement with respondents regarding the proposed inclusion of technology in the PoC and EW Mechanism may not yield the desired outcomes, as in many parts of the Box, "there is no telephone network, and cell towers barely exist".⁴⁶ Furthermore, others noted that mission personnel implemented the PoC mandate in two ways. The CLOs were the primary implementers and thus proactive in their duties, whereas the TCC and UNPOL were perceived as reactive, and this did not translate into an effective PoC strategy or responses to protection matters.

For example, the communities the team engaged with talked about the need for better protection and that, overall, the mission's sense of PoC was limited. This led the team to ask a broader question: "What does protection mean for you?" Many respondents noted that protection for them was the ability to "move freely on a daily basis, people could cultivate their land peacefully", and "take care of [their] animals without fear".

While the team acknowledges that the mission is making strides in implementing its mandate, there was a noticeable gap, such as the mission not fully grappling with aspects of the PoC beyond civilian components. For example, the communities the team engaged with talked about the need for better protection and that, overall, the mission's sense of PoC was limited. This led the team to ask a broader question: "What does protection mean for you?" Many respondents noted that protection for them was the ability to "move freely on a daily basis, people could cultivate their land peacefully", and "take care of [their] animals without fear". One community woman said, "protection is something you feel in your heart, you feel it", but collectively all agreed that is not the case, and they are not always free to move around the area.

"Physical protection to prevent attacks on ourselves is lacking", as a woman said to the team. Others noted that the mission's ability to protect remained focused on the main supply route (MSR), but even then, some TCCs were not doing enough to block the checkpoint and dismantle the rogue elements in the Box.

⁴⁶ Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

Many noted that the number of armed groups inside the Box, with the increase in roadblocks, checkpoints and imposed taxes, means that civilians' safety is not being taken seriously by the mission. One respondent noted: "when [armed] groups enter the Box, the information is not passed on to the other sectors or the chain of command". This implies a lack of coordination among the TCCs responsible for different sectors in that the movement of armed groups observed by one TCC is not communicated effectively to another. "Physical protection to prevent attacks on ourselves is lacking", as a woman said to the team. Others noted that the mission's ability to protect remained focused on the main supply route (MSR), but even then, some TCCs were not doing enough to block the checkpoint and dismantle the rogue elements in the Box. For one respondent, it could not be clearer, as they stated, "What I want them to do is protection that is proactive", not reactive after attacks have happened.⁴⁷ The findings from the respondents also speak to a wider disconnect between the mission's PoC strategy, early warning system (EWS), and data points from CPAS, JOC and JMAC. UNISFA claimed:

The EWS mechanisms were enhanced through advanced mobile technology to enable inbound and outbound information gathering and further enhance mission capability to predict imminent threats and respond swiftly.⁴⁸

Views expressed by the community members point to a critical disconnect between institutional assessments of the mandate delivery and civilian perceptions of protection. It suggests that while the mission may be fulfilling its mandate to the best of its operational capacity and maintaining accessibility, this does not necessarily translate into a sustained sense of safety or protection among the communities it serves. The mission acknowledges this sense of insecurity and thus is "prioritising onboarding of dedicated resources for civilian information gathering and analysis".⁴⁹ This process, though, has been "difficult due to liquidity constraints"⁵⁰, resulting in "only one civilian staff [being] brought into the JOC".⁵¹

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The Twic-Ngok conflict erupted during the mission's transition to a multinational force, and the emergence of the Tit Baai and other armed formations cannot be attributed to the ineffectiveness of the TCC. These events can rather be attributed to factors outside the mission's control, and linked to South Sudan's internal political and security dynamics. The same cannot be said about the RSF presence, which resulted from the war in Sudan, but its presence in the

⁴⁷ Interview 006, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

⁴⁸ See UNISFA's PoC strategy.

⁴⁹ Interview 001, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

Box can be seen as a consequence of the mission's inaction from March 2023. Many of the respondents argued that the cohesion the mission talks about did not exist, and this, for them, created a sense of disunity, especially among the TCC, who undertook the bulk of the protection. Many community members advocated that "we need one TCC to come back, under the one TCC formation. When they heard there was an attack, they would talk to us and go and chase the attackers".⁵² There seems to have been a better connection between the community, civilian personnel, TCCs and the mission compared to the RSF's relationship with communities. Several communities and respondents shared such views as: "we knew all the commanders of each sector and it was a weapon-free zone"⁵³. According to a respondent, they had not found UNISFA to respond in a timely manner to threats or potential violent conflict using preventive instruments and mechanisms, including fact-finding, mediation, peace-making dialogue, negotiations, preventive diplomacy, including the instituting of disengagement lines when necessary. In fact, many indicated that, in several situations in both the North and Centre Sectors, when information was shared with TCCs, nothing was done. Information from communities, which could feed into the mission's EWS, was not being taken into account in the mission's response. Others noted that the mission was not strategically positioned to act, even when its own staff were at risk. This has resulted in CLOs in some sectors being temporarily relocated to other sectors "because they were directly threatened".⁵⁴

One respondent suggested that UNISFA's role should be to ensure "people with weapons should be arrested and taken away and not left here".

One respondent suggested that UNISFA's role should be to ensure "people with weapons should be arrested and taken away and not left here".⁵⁵ For many, robust, swift action by UNISFA was needed to ensure better coordination and a stronger response to challenges and PoC issues in Abyei. Others felt that PoC would come when "the final status is decided".⁵⁶ According to a respondent, since the CPA, PoC has been ineffective and Abyei has become a "stockpile of weapons for actors in Sudan and in South Sudan".⁵⁷ There is a mission-wide PoC strategy; however, each TCC adapts the strategy for implementation based on its area of operation, capabilities, and interpretation. Thus, while there are similarities, differences in approaches across sectors create the perception that there is a lack of a strategic, holistic approach to PoC under

⁵² Interview 007, JCPC Member, May 24, 2026

⁵³ Interview 008, JCP Member, May 24, 2026

⁵⁴ The mission indicated that it was reassessing the situation regularly and that staff were ready to redeploy once the situation permitted them to.

⁵⁵ Interview 008, JCP Member, May 24, 2026.

⁵⁶ Interview 007, JCPC Member, May 24, 2026.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

the One UN initiative (also called “Delivering as One”).⁵⁸ For example, the Ghanabatt PoC plan is structured into three tiers:

Tier One: community engagement and liaison with TCC;

- Tier Two: physical protection; and
- Tier Three: Establishing a secure environment.

The Indian Battalion PoC approach has five tiers:

- Tier One: Protection of civilians;
- Tier Two: Protection of UN personnel and assets;
- Tier Three: Protection and freedom of movement;
- Tier Four: Delivery of humanitarian assistance; and
- Tier Five: A weapon-free zone.

The intent is the same as the above for Sector South and Centre, but the delivery differs. Additionally, in Sector South, personnel undertake training on dealing with conflict hotspots, with a focus on enhancing patrols in accordance with the UNISFA PoC approach. However, when asked about the all-terrain aspect of its PoC plan, it was noted that “our limitations are clear and that we are unable to deliver on protection during the rainy season”. This is compounded during the dry season when “forces are overwhelmed and underprepared for many of the emerging realities”⁵⁹. For some respondents, the gaps in delivering protection in the south are evident when “Nuer or even RSF-Nuer enter the Box and freely roam in and out [...] like they are on a tour”. In the rainy season, the “elements go cross-country through the bush and swampy areas”, which the forces in the south are unable to respond to.⁶⁰ This is compounded by the fact that most of the area has not been demined. As a result, one senior official remarked that it is important for forces to be “deployed with boats to allow them to move when [the] rainy season set[s] in”, noting the mobility of TCC forces in the south is crucial for effective response to PoC and protection.

58 UN General Assembly. (2006). Follow-up to the outcome of the Millennium Summit. A/61/583. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/61/583>

59 Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

60 Interview 013, UNISFA, May 25, 2026.

However, when asked about the all-terrain aspect of its PoC plan, it was noted that “our limitations are clear and that we are unable to deliver on protection during the rainy season”. This is compounded during the dry season when “forces are overwhelmed and underprepared for many of the emerging realities”. The gaps in delivering protection in the south are evident when “Nuer or even RSF-Nuer enter the Box and freely roam in and out [...] like they are on a tour”.

Overall, the civilian respondents the team engaged with argued that the mission could be doing better at protecting civilians. As one respondent noted, the Ethiopian troops were previously in Abyei, and “this was going well, but now it’s not going as well”.⁶¹ In 2025, “there was cattle raiding by Nuer in front of UNISFA troops, and they could not do anything to respond”. The respondent further said:

[...] two days ago, there was an attack on the north side near where civilians are between the RSF. Women and children wanted to enter the UN camp, but were denied access by the RSF. What type of protection is this?

However, it is important to note that the area of Abyei has changed significantly and there has been a decrease in TCC numbers, coupled with complex security dynamics (RSF, SSPDF, Tit Baai, Nuers). However, for many, the mission’s inability to deal with the RSF in 2023 and 2024 has partly triggered a negative spiral. This is impacting its ability to protect itself as it faces multiple threats, particularly those entering the Box. A more explicit example of this came from a woman representative who noted: “there is a change since 2023, when forces in the north did brilliant work, but the TCCs have continued to allow problematic entities like the RSF in the Box and camps.”⁶² However, as the 2023 EPON-TfP report noted, there was also criticism directed at the Ethiopian forces. In fact, the team’s own observation was that, while the mission had done more through its engagement with the traditional actors of the conflict in Abyei, resulting in “strong bonds and links between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya”, the mission needed to reconfigure how it does protection and PoC more broadly.

61 Interview 008, JCP, May 24, 2026.

62 Interview 007, Diffra leaders, May 24, 2026.

A more explicit example of this came from a woman representative who noted: “there is a change since 2023, when forces in the north did brilliant work, but the TCCs have continued to allow problematic entities like the RSF in the Box and camps.”

The military component comprises approximately 90 per cent of the mission, and UNISFA is still heavily reliant on a militarised approach to PoC. The reduction in troop size and transition to a multinational peacekeeping force left troops with limited contingent-owned equipment (COE) to manage the same area of responsibility (AOR) amid rapidly changing security dynamics. Consequently, there is a mismatch between what people see as PoC and what the mission is offering. There is a retail shop-and-customer or consumer relationship between the mission and community. While this relationship is not as bad as it was between 2022 and 2024, and there was also a recovery in the latter part of 2024 and 2025, the relationship is now strained again. A respondent noted that “we agree that UNISFA should stay”, but the real-life situation needs to pivot to “better protection and better PoC outcomes” for communities linked to a shared understanding of the threat. The continuous conflict between civilian expectations of protection and what UNISFA actually delivers can also be attributed to the mission’s heavily militarised posture. Most protection activities are perceived to have been undertaken by the TCC. Despite this, the mission has been working with the CPC and the JCPC on the establishment of a protective environment.

“We agree that UNISFA should stay”, but the real-life situation needs to pivot to “better protection and better PoC outcomes” for communities linked to a shared understanding of the threat.

Effectiveness of the PoC Approach

When it comes to the effectiveness of the mission’s approach on PoC, the team observed similar findings to the 2024 OIOS report, which noted:

[...] the collection of information on the ongoing violence and emerging threats and the ability to identify threats were translated into consistent same-day responses to incidents. However, that did not result in a reduction in the number or nature of incidents and with the recent influx of diverse armed actors and the rise in violence attributed to crime, efficacy in the provision of physical protection diminished when faced with the need to respond to multiple PoC incidents occurring at the same time.⁶³

63 OIOS. (2024). Outcome Evaluation. op. cit.

Since the UNSC reduced the number of TCC [forces], things have taken a turn for the worse”.

This was reflected again when the team asked about the effectiveness of the mission. A respondent stated: “Protection was better before, but since the UNSC reduced the number of TCC [forces], things have taken a turn for the worse”.⁶⁴ When the team engaged with mission staff on the effectiveness of the mission to carry out PoC, varied responses were given, such as: “the strategy is useful to us, but it does not need changing [...] the budget cuts are what we are struggling with, as the resources are little to carry out PoC effectively”.⁶⁵ A respondent noted: “Budget cuts did not affect the main TCCs, and only a support unit was removed”. However, the cuts primarily affected community engagement, which had to be reduced. Others noted that the mission’s effectiveness has seen success in “Protection during migration/seasonal movements through conference and dialogue, which appears to be working”.⁶⁶ In fact, the team noted throughout the visit that the CLOs’ efforts were not only reducing tension but also bringing the communities together. This was done through the conference, relatable engagement of the mission’s CLOs with all types of actors across various levels of the state, region and community, and indirect human security approaches. Not a single respondent indicated a negative view of the work of CLOs.

In fact, the team noted throughout the visit that the CLOs’ efforts were not only reducing tension but also bringing the communities together... Not a single respondent indicated a negative view of the work of CLOs.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of PoC can be argued to rest not only with mission leadership but also in how TCCs choose to engage during incidents and the proactive approach they may take. For example, some mission staff noted that “PoC and protection varies according to the sector and the TCC, and some are more willing to engage than others”.⁶⁷ Others noted that the chain of command and decision-making among the COE, mission leaders, UN Headquarters (HQ), and TCC capitals continued to play a significant role in how TCCs would engage on the issue of protection. As one military personnel that the team engaged with noted, “our TCC [forces] are basically firefighters”, and they have “never contributed to early warning, or early response to protection”, being reactive rather than proactive. They added that information is received well after incidents occur, and TCCs thus often respond after incidents.⁶⁸ This wider

⁶⁴ Interview 004, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

⁶⁵ Interview 001, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

⁶⁶ Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Interview 002, UNISFA May 21, 2026.

division in implementing the UNISFA PoC strategy was also noted by the OICO in the 2024 report:

While the revised draft PoC strategy highlighted some of the changing contextual and security dynamics, it did not capture the full scope and complexity of issues. From an implementation perspective, there was ambiguity about how different components would adapt their work in response to changing political and contextual factors.⁶⁹

Others noted that the chain of command and decision-making among the COE, mission leaders, UN Headquarters (HQ), and TCC capitals continued to play a significant role in how TCCs would engage on the issue of protection.

Military personnel noted that if local residents invite the RSF into the Box, it creates additional challenges for the mission in protecting civilians, considering the diverse actors in the Box. Another respondent noted that Major General Affram started moving things in the right direction, but improvements could be made by connecting military operations with critical coordination and guidance to support the effective implementation of PoC.⁷⁰ A respondent felt that, as a consequence of this disunity that communities felt, “civilian[s] protect themselves and not the mission”.⁷¹ Others noted that efforts to ensure positive community engagement on a weapon-free initiative are taking place,⁷² but this was probably the best the mission could do with its limited resources. For the team, the broader concern was that the mission and TCCs seemed to have no strategic PoC plan to address the major issue of unauthorised actors in the Box. Not engaging systematically on this appears to have led to a continued normalisation of actors in the Box.⁷³ For communities, “the presence of the RSF and the SSPDF is a problem as we are unable to go to our homes”.⁷⁴ In addition, the mission has not been able to deal with the Tit Baai—who are organised as an army and even have a chief of staff. More concerning is the fact that the RSF and the SSPDF had come to an agreement over the Wonko (Panthou) and Heglig oil fields, under which both groups monitor the area, but the oil fields are east of the Box.⁷⁵ It’s important to note that while this area is outside of Abyei, it could have ramifications for the mission, and it is an area the mission should continue to monitor for wider implications.

69 OIOS. (2024). Outcome Evaluation. op. cit. p. 10.

70 Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

71 Interview 007, Diffra leaders, UNISFA, May 24, 2026.

72 Interview 003, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

73 Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

74 Interview 006, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

75 Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026; Dawn News English. (2025). South Sudan says Troops Securing Key Heglig Oil Field. 12 December. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvaJJrQzSE0&ct=2s>

Interviewees provided varying perspectives about the mission's effectiveness, with some TCCs noting that while the SSPDF do have weapons in the Box, TCCs in the south have been able to consistently raise the issue in the past. This has also enabled the forces to have a good relationship with the SSPDF and to operate in these areas without the forces preventing them.⁷⁶ As a result, there is a sense that in Sector South, TCCs can be alerted about criminal activities before they occur and they are able to "immediately respond" at times.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, for some respondents in other sectors, there was a sense that this was not the case and that often "there is no response or TCCs just look at our faces with confusion due to language barriers". For example, when weapons are fired in the air and the community "report[s] it, there is no response". Respondents in the north noted that their communication with TCCs in the past was very effective and they "had contact with TCCs directly, but this has changed since the new forces arrived in Sector North".⁷⁸

Not engaging systematically on this appears to have led to a continued normalisation of actors in the Box. For communities, "the presence of the RSF and the SSPDF is a problem as we are unable to go to our homes".

The mission's response to PoC issues is sometimes left wanting, and while there is some relative level of response, it still appears that, to a large extent, it is "not strong when delivering PoC and protection".⁷⁹ Thus, it lacks a holistic, connected, and synergistic approach to delivering the mandate. Oftentimes, when asked directly by the team about the effectiveness of PoC by TCCs and UNPOL, respondents discuss inefficiencies and attribute this to a deficiency in equipment for CPCs, such as motorcycles, phones, and airtime, which are crucial for transmitting information. Others pointed to bad road infrastructure, lack of fuel, and poor network connectivity. However, none were able to look beyond this to find innovative ways of delivering PoC. It was often as if the TCCs and some UNPOL were not proactive, and communities would express deep frustration with this approach. Many shared sentiments such as: "Why are they here if they are not willing to engage and do PoC?" Some even gave more explicit examples. When the team engaged in a conversation with both communities and TCC forces together, one respondent noted: "we can get information from our communities, and when we tell the mission, it will take them six to eight hours for someone to maybe come or not to come and engage on what we have". The sector commander responded to this, saying: "We have to wait for directions and approval from Abyei HQ; if they do not send a response, then we cannot engage at all".⁸⁰ This example reveals a breakdown in community trust, engagement, and dialogue with TCC forces

⁷⁶ Interview 013, UNISFA, May 25, 2026.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Interview 008, JCPC member, May 24, 2026.

⁷⁹ Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

⁸⁰ Interview 007, Diffra leaders, May 24, 2026.

in Sector North. The challenge extends to patrols. During the same meeting, one community leader noted that they rarely see TCCs in Sector North patrolling, and that this was very odd, considering that RSF elements were roaming in the Box. The leadership of the TCCs in question explained: “We provide two-night patrols per week and seven patrols per day; we do not think there is a need to do more because the situation from our perspective is better and insecurity has reduced compared to 2025”.⁸¹ Similar observations were noted in the 2024 OIOS report:

Despite POC being a central mission priority, knowledge of the existence of a POC strategy was fragmented across different levels at UNISFA. As of October 2023, the old strategy was a year out of date, and the review process is still ongoing to ensure a comprehensive consultative approach across staff and stakeholders. [...] There was limited understanding of how the revised draft strategy adapted to changes in contextual factors.⁸²

The mission’s response to PoC issues is sometimes left wanting, and while there is some relative level of response, it still appears that, to a large extent, it is “not strong when delivering PoC and protection”. Thus, it lacks a holistic, connected, and synergistic approach to delivering the mandate.

Similarly, the team’s overall view is that some personnel in the mission have a level of awareness of PoC, but not of the overall PoC strategy. For example, in conversations with the TCC in Sector North, PoC was implemented in the following broad areas: aggressive long-range patrolling, vigilance along the corridor, and humanitarian assistance. This differs from how other sectors previously defined the mandate. However, one senior official emphasised that the forces in the south could be doing much more, but there are environmental limitations: “Yes, the weather conditions are against them, but the level or standard of protection needed to improve and be more strategic”.⁸³ In conversations with TCC officials from Sector South, it was clear that they understood the mission’s focus on PoC. This was carefully illustrated during the presentation to the team.⁸⁴ The respondents indicated that their aims were to:

1. Dominate and demilitarise the Sector South and create a safe and secure environment;
2. Conduct defensive and offensive operations;
3. Protect civilians in danger of violence;
4. Engage in humanitarian work with key leaders; and
5. Ensure safety across the three MSRs in Athony, south of the Box.

⁸¹ Interview 008, Diffra leaders, May 24, 2026.

⁸² OIOS. (2024). Outcome Evaluation. op. cit. p. 10.

⁸³ Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

⁸⁴ Interview 013, UNISFA, May 25th, 2026.

However, when asked directly about the ability of the forces in the south to protect and engage on protection issues, a respondent agreed: “there is always more that we can do”. However, “Awang thou, Aneet and Rummamier are the main routes where non-state armed groups enter the Box, which often means forces have to be placed on these routes for days” with no backup.⁸⁵ Concerning the rainy season, a respondent said: “we risk our forces being trapped due to the impact of climate change and the adverse effects it can have not only on the road conditions but also on personnel’s ability to move”.⁸⁶ Another respondent from the military in Sector South said that the forces have focused more on allowing communities to return, but cross-border criminality, intercommunal clashes, and cattle rustling make this challenging. During seasonal migration, when other groups, like the “Nuer coming in from Unity State in South Sudan”, enter the area, there is:

[...] an increase in cattle rustling but also increased incursion into the Box, which becomes difficult for us to deal with. In addition, SSPDF not only undermine[s] UNISFA’s mandate but also brings in weapons and insecurity from South Sudan into Abyei”.⁸⁷

Civilians the team engaged with also felt that UNISFA’s PoC strategy was alive but not as effective, and its early warning approach needed to be improved. The mission protection and PoC strategy is a somewhat one-size-fits-all approach. The actors inside the Box are using violence, engaging in criminal activities and self-protection, which the current strategy does not respond to adequately. In addition, it appears that both the revised PoC strategy and EWM fall short in applying a gendered lens and ensuring that the policy is culturally sensitive to the local people.⁸⁸ The current mission posture is more reactive than proactive. As another respondent noted, “when we see a convoy from Diffra going to the centre through Pakistan’s sector, the reporting was not going up the [...] chain until [after] the incident occurred”.⁸⁹ There is a sense of tiredness and acceptance by some TCCs towards the levels of criminality and instability in the community, and certain incidents are no longer reported. Furthermore, some sectors have limited or no civilian mission personnel presence. Thus, if and when the local population engages with the mission, it does so through the military only.

The team’s own observations and assessment are that the PoC strategy links less with expectations and is more focused on presence and patrolling in hotspots, which seem to misalign with communities’ expectations, data-driven analysis, and recurring patterns of incidents. Nonetheless, this is not evident in all sectors, including CLO, TCC and UNPOL, but there is a sense that in some sectors forces are trying, while others are doing the minimum. Strategically, it is unclear how the engagement at the political level on PoC and protection is connected with benchmarks or how the benchmarks supported the mission engagement on the matter. The wider challenge

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Interview 013, UNISFA, May 25, 2026.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

⁸⁹ Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

of the RSF, a lack of social cohesion, predatory behaviours, certain groups' fragmentation, and the clashes along subtribe lines⁹⁰ also seem not to be factored into the mission PoC approach. Communities often stated, for example, that the “presence of UNISFA is seen but not felt”, with the number of TCCs not being enough to do PoC.⁹¹ Consequently, there is a lack of trust between the mission and communities in some sectors. TCCs and communities need to rebuild trust to support PoC and wider protection matters.⁹²

The mission protection and PoC strategy is a somewhat one-size-fits-all approach. The actors inside the Box are using violence, engaging in criminal activities and self-protection, which the current strategy does not respond to adequately.

The mission has a PoC WG composed of CLOs as the secretariat, and it includes the Force, the Police, JOC, JMAC, Mission Support, and the Gender, Mine Action, Legal, and Strategic Communications (StratCom) sections as well as others who provide input for PoC planning and strategic conversations. The effectiveness and integration of the mission's PoC approach seems to largely still hinge on some persons “working with certain people that they feel comfortable with, which results in further fragmentation within the mission”.⁹³ Some explained that even at senior leadership level, certain staff members feel sidelined on PoC, while certain preferred choices are listened to and prioritised, leading to some staff having to negotiate carefully to push through PoC policy efforts. This results in a “not well-coordinated approach to PoC”, with staff not wanting to “rock the boat”.⁹⁴

Securing the Environment

When it comes to securing a protective environment, the OIOS report noted that:

At the mission, its functionality was affected by the absence of an operational room with radios at the headquarters, a scarcity of language assistants for interpreting community messages, and a lack of integration with existing platforms like the Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System (CPAS) and Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise (SAGE).⁹⁵

90 Interview 003, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

91 Ibid.

92 Interview 006, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

93 Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

94 Ibid.

95 OIOS. (2024). Outcome Evaluation. op. cit. p. 13.

The team's time in Abyei revealed that the mission was still mostly focused on patrols (along the MSR), which yielded mixed results, and its overall coverage remained a challenge. According to some respondents, the mission had only introduced a synchronised patrol-planning meeting recently, i.e., a few weeks before the team's visit.⁹⁶

While it is acknowledged that the mission has been unable to receive the intended Abyei Police Service (APS) forces, the continued challenges in the deployment of FPU, criminal activities, intercommunal violence, and arms for hire continue. Respondents repeated that the mission was still waiting on the FPU, with no plan in the interim period. However, one respondent did note: "The Bangladeshi and Pakistani troops were deployed to Amiet to handle security matters". When pressed deeper on the matter, a respondent from the mission said: "we have static patrol to dominate the area and the coverage of these areas".⁹⁷ The current strength of police is approximately 60 personnel, but this is less than 10 per cent of the mission's needs,⁹⁸ and there should be plans in place to ensure that the mission is able to respond.

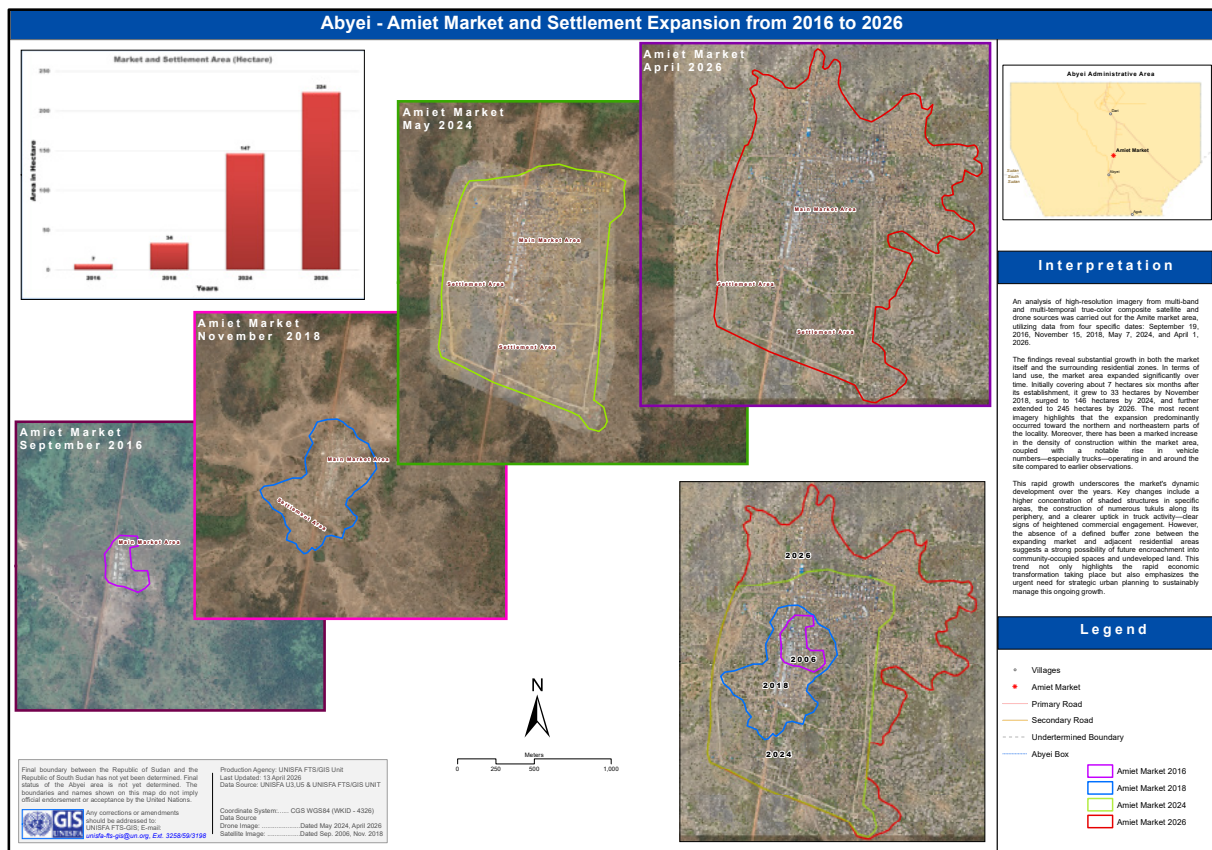
Satellite imagery shows how the Amiet Market, once deemed an innovative idea, has expanded in both space and time. This presents the mission with the challenge of securing a protective environment and managing internal issues and border issues collectively.

The wider concern is that there appears to be misunderstandings about the changes in population size and spread across Abyei. For example, satellite imagery shows how the Amiet Market, once deemed an innovative idea, has expanded in both space and time. This presents the mission with the challenge of securing a protective environment and managing internal issues and border issues collectively.

⁹⁶ Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

⁹⁷ Interview 003, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

⁹⁸ Interview 001, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

Figure 4.1: Amiet Market and settlement from 2016 to 2026

UNISFA GIS; Amiet Market, 2016–2026

Densely populated areas, such as Amiet Market and Settlement shown in Figure 4.1, serve as a meeting point for communities. However, they can also pose challenges in responding to PoC threats and sustaining a secure environment. As one senior UNPOL official noted, “the general crime data has increased a lot in this area, and conflicts triggered by criminal activities especially around the market”.⁹⁹ The same challenges exist in areas outside the centre, with several respondents noting that, in rural areas such as Makar and Noong, the mission cannot conduct PoC and is not available there. People living in these areas face the highest threat to their security, and not those in town.¹⁰⁰ Figure 4.2 to 4.9 below show how settlements in Banton, Diffra, Noong and Todach have grown. Thus, communities are relocating into the township for security, including those in and around the UN Company Operating Bases (COBs) and Amiet Market areas. During the rainy season, personnel are unable to access the roads, and during the dry season, there is seasonal migration.

⁹⁹ Interview 003, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

¹⁰⁰ Interview 006, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

Figure 4.2: Banton in 2021



Source: UNISFA

Figure 4.3: Banton in 2025



Source: UNISFA

Figure 4.4: Diffra in 2021



Source: UNISFA

Figure 4.5: Diffra in 2025



Source: UNISFA

Figure 4.6: Noong in 2021



Source: UNISFA

Figure 4.7: Noong in 2025



Source: UNISFA

Figure 4.8: Todach in 2021

Source: UNISFA

Figure 4.9: Todach in 2025

Source: UNISFA

Many respondents praised the effective handling of limited resources, resulting in a more responsive force. Despite this, some respondents within the mission and in the communities felt that the mission's efforts to secure the environment tended to focus on the UN COB and its

surrounding areas, rather than strategically acting outside the mission's buffer or comfort zone. Community members expressed dissatisfaction with troop reductions and asset removals, while community leaders often felt uninformed and excluded from the planning process, especially regarding securing environments. There was a perception that recent and past site closures were not informed by sound analysis, with respondents noting that the withdrawal of troops from key sites previously covered by the Ethiopian contingent has left gaps for other actors to come in. Examples were given of alleged civilian deaths and property theft in the presence of TCCs who are unable or unwilling to engage.¹⁰¹ Some mission personnel indicated that this has resulted in mission leadership and the New York (NY) Integrated Operational Team (IOT) insisting on integrated patrolling to ensure that mission patrols do not end at specific times (18:00, at the time of writing), but are scheduled at different times each day.

Some mission personnel indicated that this has resulted in mission leadership and the New York (NY) Integrated Operational Team (IOT) insisting on integrated patrolling to ensure that mission patrols do not end at specific times (18:00, at the time of writing), but are scheduled at different times each day.

While the UNSC mandate is clear on PoC as a primary mission task, supported by the physical presence of troops across sectors and at hotspots, the team found that community engagement initiatives, collaborative efforts with local leaders, and tailored approaches to address community needs to secure environments of protection are lacking. One senior official noted:

[...] we have a lot of patrols, but the current difficulties that we have impact how far we go. This means less money for conferences, less impact on security, and we cannot do human rights monitoring, gender monitoring, and peacebuilding effectively, resulting in limited engagement and constraints.¹⁰²

Another noted that despite communities' views, they do carry out "systematic consultations with communities, which inform patrol planning and the design of dialogue processes". The team observed that the mission excelled in dialogue processes but was still experiencing challenges with patrolling. A respondent explained: "our patrol go[es] out on joint patrols to demine, but because of budget cuts, we were not able to do this consistently".¹⁰³ Soldiers in Abyei are not from a single country, which creates disunity among the troops and contributes to a lack of coordination and collaboration in their approach to PoC and protection.¹⁰⁴ As a consequence,

¹⁰¹ Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

¹⁰² Interview 003, UNISFA, May 21, 2026. It is important to note that according to mission figures, "Budget reductions have not impacted UNISFA's budgeted PoC operations".

¹⁰³ Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

¹⁰⁴ Interview 004, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

ensuring a secure environment becomes about what the CLOs and TCCs are doing, equating to a “mono approach to PoC”.¹⁰⁵ This is even more evident given the number of unauthorised checkpoints observed from Sector North to Sector Centre, right under the nose of the mission. As one respondent noted, “we now have an increased number of checkpoints” by non-state actors in the Box, indicating that there is no PoC in the Box.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, the TCCs are underreporting, which means that PoC are still not being conducted systematically.

As a consequence, ensuring a secure environment becomes about what the CLOs and TCCs are doing, equating to a “mono approach to PoC”. This is even more evident given the number of unauthorised checkpoints observed from Sector North to Sector Centre, right under the nose of the mission.

Some stated that the mission supplied GSM phones to communities, but they did not have network connectivity. This contributed to a sense that the mission’s synchronisation is lacking. Furthermore, during the visit in September 2025 and May 2026, the team saw that the RSF had built a detention camp behind Goli Market in Sector North. Respondents indicated that “people were being tortured” in the camp. For many both within UNISFA and outside, there was a sense that “the protection that the mission provides is not reliable”. A respondent stated: “The mission gets a call on issues, but the sectors’ TCC commanders often don’t respond with sufficient speed or response, which results in vagueness”.¹⁰⁷ For one female leader, “UNISFA needs to carry out PoC checks inside and around Abyei through better patrols to stop armed groups in the Box. [...] we need UNISFA to be at the border.”¹⁰⁸

The presence of multi-national contingents has resulted in fractured engagement: “what looks good on paper is not the same as what is [happening] in practice”. A similar point was noted by a senior military official from Sector South, who argued: “the mission needs to get more serious with the issue of arms in the Box and [make a] unified response”.

¹⁰⁵ Interview 007, UNISFA, May 24, 2026

¹⁰⁶ Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Interview 004, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

Many argued that the emergence of the Tit Baai was directly connected to UNISFA's inability to provide protection once the Ethiopian contingent left. As one respondent indicated:

The Misseriya leaders also argue that the RSF was coming to “help UNISFA” protect people. It is a narrative that is systematically used by armed actors to justify their presence. As we know, the Tit Baai were established as a response to the Tit Weng, the Twic armed youth, to fight during the Ngok-Twic conflict.

The presence of multi-national contingents has resulted in fractured engagement: “what looks good on paper is not the same as what is [happening] in practice”.¹⁰⁹ A similar point was noted by a senior military official from Sector South, who argued: “the mission needs to get more serious with the issue of arms in the Box and [make a] unified response”. They added: “We are not demilitarising, but we are asking them to leave arms at home; we don't have a government or Demobilisation, Disarmament Reform, Security Sector Reform programme here, nor experts”. However, “there is a need for both the mission leadership and NY to take this up at a higher level and properly engage on this matter”.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, regarding the issue of “Tit Baai, we have been unable to engage them, but they are a very well-structured group, which poses a real threat to stability in the Box”.¹¹¹

However, “there is a need for both the mission leadership and NY to take this up at a higher level and properly engage on this matter”.

One senior community leader noted on the issue of weapons or demobilising the Box that “we are ready for the youth [Tit Baai] to put down their arms and can tell them to go back to their role as students”. A summary of discussions with other community leaders expressed similar sentiments:

[...] to do this, we need assurances that the mission will step up its efforts to secure Abyei and stop allowing armed elements inside the Box. Now we have three RSF fragments in the Box. RSF from Sudan, RSF-Misseriya and RSF-Nuer – all of whom should not be operating in the Box or be given the legitimacy to operate in the Box without a challenge.¹¹²

TCCs and mission leadership acknowledge that maintaining a weapons-free zone is challenging. However, this approach seems to lack strategic thinking in part because leaving arms at home does not equate to resolution or demobilisation of groups. When this is linked to youth seeing the incentives that arms bring, it is unlikely that the mission will be able to demobilise

¹⁰⁹ Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

¹¹⁰ Interview 013, UNISFA, May 25, 2026.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Interview 008, Diffra leaders, May 24, 2026; Interview 011, Juba Appointed Leader, May 22, 2026.

groups. In essence, while putting weapons away or “not on show” is effective for “official high-level field visits”, it does not address the underlying issues and root causes of conflict in Abyei.

Sustain the Protection Agenda through Community Engagement and Local Dialogue Mechanisms

Despite the challenges, respondents noted that “after the Ethiopians left, we had difficulties inside the Box and UNISFA was not working with the administrator”.¹¹³ Furthermore, the mission was perceived as engaging only with the local chiefs, being more Sudan-focused, and not discussing aspects such as the mandate.¹¹⁴ However, the mission has made significant progress, achieving sustainable gains, with Major General Affram’s role being crucial to this success. As noted by respondents, “his blend of engagement with all leaders [and] political ability to listen” helped, and he also “knew and understood the context”.¹¹⁵ The change the community leaders noted can be further attributed to “the UNSC Resolution, which helped UNISFA to focus on the Juba-appointed administrator. When complemented with Affram’s leadership, things started to move in the right direction”.¹¹⁶ There also seems to be momentum within segments of the mission around the new strategy, which is helping to systematise the current approach as a whole-mission approach.¹¹⁷ In Diffra, leaders noted:

We are benefiting from the CLO engagement and the dialogue efforts that UNISFA is carrying out. These are the only people that we trust to get things done and to move things forward, but they understand what the community needs and how to deliver it.

The dialogues have also helped to create a peaceful coexistence between the Misseriya and the Ngok Dinka groups. However, an interviewee stated: “we need development in this area”, and they asked for how long UNISFA would “continue to stand still and not support the communities in this direction”.

For some respondents, the community aspect of PoC is linked to wider aspects such as children’s rights, women’s rights, and land issues:

We need the Box cleared of elements from the north and south. The Box must be weapons-free, and all the criminal elements should be dealt with. We are still waiting for the FPU. Where are the police, and why have they not come? The people on the civilian side are always doing the engagement, but they never have the power to move things forward.

¹¹³ Interview 011, Juba Appointed Leader, May 22, 2026.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Interview 011, Juba Appointed Leader, May 22, 2026.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.; Interview 013, UNISFA, May 25, 2026.

¹¹⁷ Interview 003, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

The UN must support the CLO and UNPOL, as they are close to the communities and directly deliver local peace dividends.¹¹⁸

However, the use of FPU's will not be able to address all criminality challenges through the systematic use of force against criminals, which means the challenge will remain. Thus, part of the PoC challenges are structural and linked to the absence of the State and its related institutions. Additionally, the challenge of sustaining protection was noted by a senior leader:

Under Major General Affram, a big effort was made to gain and use information to feed the mission operations to protection and to frame the mission's objective on PoC. Nevertheless, since his departure, there appears to be a pivot away from this approach.¹¹⁹

Another respondent noted:

When an incident took place [with the] RSF command from North Kordofan [in which] six people were killed, I spoke with Affram to plug in the gaps and help bring normalcy, which he did. Affram demonstrated recognition that people from Abyei have knowledge and that supporting pathways to dialogue and mediation can help settle insecurity in the Box. [...] Affram would sit with me about proactive information-sharing and react proactively. This was significantly different from past leadership.¹²⁰

Past sustained engagement with Civil Affairs (CA), local chiefs, women, and youth also produced success. However, CLO numbers have been shrinking, and this is detrimental to their work and the mission's work.¹²¹ The team noted that community-based protection approaches that employ dialogue are helping to equip and empower them. CLOs, who are continually in touch with traditional leaders and other leaders in these communities, are also producing success.¹²² As one senior official for TCCs noted:

We have had no issues in the last seven months during the period when the migration agreements were signed, but communication is key, and we need to ensure that engagement is done.¹²³

Overall, there appears to be a broader challenge with the mission's sectoral approach to community engagement and to delivering on PoC outcomes. This is especially apparent in the AOR, where the activities of armed elements pose problems for PoC. This includes armed cross-border clashes and limited mobility of peacekeepers, which can lead to cattle-rustling by Nuers from South Sudan during the wet season. In addition, most of the existing roads have become

118 Interview 008, JCPC member, May 24, 2026.

119 Interview 011, Juba Appointed Leader, May 22, 2026.

120 Ibid.; Interview 003, UNISFA, May 21, 2026; Interview 008, JCPC member, May 24, 2026.

121 Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

122 Interview 003, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

123 Ibid; Interview 012, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

impassable. The COB near the MSR has become impossible to reach, and access is curbed for communities.¹²⁴ While these challenges were presented to the team, a TCC official further stated: “we cannot instantly get to civilians [...], but we do go on foot patrols where needed”.¹²⁵ Further conversation confirmed that, “while the TCCs do have a mandate to protect, [the] unit force strength is not sufficient to carry out everyday functions”. For example, “while TCCs in Sector South plan to dominate” the area, the “means by which forces can do this is limited, as [they] are over-stretched”. Other challenges include that up to 60 per cent of TCC forces from the South are unable to take leave. Some are conducting three-day and night area-dominated patrols (ADPs) alone, and the capacity to deploy two forward medical teams and medical evacuation in remote areas of level one is difficult.

As a 2023 EPON report indicated, the “current forces are not like the Ethiopian[s] who were everywhere”, and the same issue was raised during the team’s visit.

Overall, while some TCCs appeared to have a better connection and engagement with communities, there was a sense from communities that some TCCs in Sector Centre and North do not listen when they are “advise[d] on [the] movement of actors in and out of the Box”.¹²⁶ As a 2023 EPON report indicated, the “current forces are not like the Ethiopian[s] who were everywhere”, and the same issue was raised during the team’s visit.¹²⁷ The lack of available language assistance also prevents mission TCCs from improving their effectiveness in the community. The mission has identified this gap in language assistance and indicated to the team that “measures”¹²⁸ are needed, including recruiting a Translation Unit Head in the current budget year “to manage a centralised pool of language assistants”.¹²⁹ Overall, this undermines effective civil-military engagement and diminishes community support for the PoC approach. As one respondent noted, this has significantly reduced engagement with communities, information flow, and early-warning response. Against this backdrop is the reduction in humanitarian activities and their broader role in supporting PoC through QIPs, which will be considered in the next section.¹³⁰

124 Interview 013, UNISFA, May 25, 2026.

125 Ibid.

126 Interview 004, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

127 Ibid.

128 Interview 001, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

129 Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

130 Interview 004, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.



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Humanitarian Assistance

It is important to note that, in principle, the mission's mandate speaks more of PoC and humanitarian actors. Therefore, the mission, which is not a humanitarian entity, does not have a direct humanitarian mandate, nor does it provide humanitarian assistance. However, through QIPs, the mission supports community engagement and mandate implementation by showing peace dividends. Through the Abyei Joint Programme, the mission provides “an enabling environment for dialogue and sustainable peace”¹³¹ between Juba and Khartoum to address some of the drivers of conflict. The mission's in-house programmatic funding supports mandate implementation. Finally, the mission TCCs carry out civil-military coordination (CIMIC) as part of its “hearts and minds” efforts to win over populations.

However, a recurring message from all respondents was that the communities do not separate humanitarian assistance from security. Respondents consistently linked access to food, health-care, livelihoods, and basic services to the mission's ability to provide protection. All sectors visited had elements of humanitarian assistance embedded in their PoC strategy. Several community members noted that insecurity prevented them from accessing farmlands, grazing areas, and their homes. As a result, people are increasingly concentrated in centres such as Abyei town and Amiet market, creating secondary humanitarian challenges including overcrowding, disease

¹³¹ Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

outbreaks, and pressure on already limited services. Thus, the creation of numerous checkpoints and the presence of diverse armed groups inhibit their ability to safely access land for cultivation, thereby increasing food insecurity. It further restricts their movement and access to the limited healthcare, market, and humanitarian assistance.

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The reduction in budgets and shrinking size of the mission has resulted in the elimination of QIPs from the 2025-2026 budget. These projects were among the most positively viewed aspects of the mission's engagement. Respondents highlighted the value of mission-supported education and health interventions and viewed these activities as tangible demonstrations of UNISFA's commitment to local communities. Such projects were seen as contributing to confidence-building between the mission and civilians. Though there was some backlash over how the mission allocated resources between the north and the south (a 50/50 approach was not welcomed by Ngok Dinka leaders), the initiatives were needed. Respondents across the board acknowledged that reductions in funding, personnel, and programming have constrained the mission's ability to respond to growing humanitarian needs. Several respondents noted that humanitarian actors have all but left the Box, increasing the demands on UNISFA with its limited resources, creating a gap between community expectations and available support. A great concern highlighted by mission personnel, especially the TCC, was the conditions of the roads, especially during the rainy seasons. Areas become inaccessible, reducing mission mobility and the forces' ability to respond in emergencies. For the community, this means that mission patrols and responses decline during periods of flooding, humanitarian access becomes restricted, and rural populations become increasingly isolated.



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5. Inclusion of Women in Local Dialogue and Mediation

OIOS conducted an “audit of the recruitment of international staff and the hiring of consultants in UNISFA” for 2025 and 2026, concluding that the mission “needed to establish and monitor incremental targets to progressively advance gender parity and geographical diversity objectives”.¹³² Interactions with diverse groups in the mission and the community highlighted that women’s participation is largely event-driven and dependent on specific activities, rather than being embedded within routine mission practice. Respondents described engagement with women as ad hoc and inconsistent. Several respondents argued that the mission cannot effectively promote gender-inclusive governance externally if it does not sufficiently reflect those principles internally.

The team noted that the limited number of women in senior leadership positions could be viewed as undermining the mission’s credibility as a champion of the WPS agenda. The mission assured the team that half of the components are led by women; however, it could not be ascertained how many of these leaders engaged with the local community to showcase women in leadership. Respondents acknowledged that UNISFA has made efforts to incorporate WPS principles into its activities. However, implementation remains constrained by structural and operational challenges. As already noted, there is the absence of a civilian gender advisor, but the CLOs have continued to play a role in the mission’s implementation of the WPS agenda through support for women’s participation in the peace management process, as well as through

132 UN General Assembly. (2026). Activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Service. op. cit., p. 13.

responding to specific protection issues with the support of relevant partners. In addition, there is an IOT Gender Officer who supports the coordination of the WPS agenda.

A recent youth conference achieved approximately 30 per cent female representation, which was frequently cited as an example of progress, although respondents stressed that such initiatives remain exceptions rather than the norm.

Nevertheless, a recurring concern was the limited representation of women beyond mission leadership and within local peace and security structures. While female personnel are present within military contingents, respondents frequently characterised their participation as symbolic rather than substantive. Similarly, key community-based mechanisms, including the JCPC, remain male-dominated, with women and youth largely excluded from founding structures and decision-making processes. Nevertheless, respondents noted emerging awareness among mission leadership regarding the importance of diversity, inclusion, and broader participation. Notwithstanding this, participation is often facilitated by traditional authorities, particularly paramount chiefs, established women's organisations (which are frequently called and relied upon), umbrella groups, or representative networks. Consequently, engagement tends to favour existing power structures rather than creating new spaces for women's meaningful participation. Despite this, a recent youth conference achieved approximately 30 per cent female representation, which was frequently cited as an example of progress, although respondents stressed that such initiatives remain exceptions rather than the norm. Additionally, women interviewed emphasised that participation cannot be separated from security. Freedom of movement, access to information about threats, and the ability to safely engage in farming, firewood collection, livestock management, and community life were viewed as prerequisites for meaningful participation in public affairs. As a result, respondents frequently linked the participation pillar of WPS to the mission's ability to provide effective protection.

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Female Engagement Teams

The team's interactions with TCCs indicated that all TCCs have female engagement teams that undertake specialised patrols as part of community engagement, intelligence gathering, and trust-building. However, the team only saw these women in the Sector Centre and Sector South. In Sector North, the team was informed that there were women teams, but they were not deployed or positioned at any visible locations. One TCC noted:

We have around 25 female engagement personnel with us, which supports creating a positive impact with local communities [...] we do try to use these female engagement officers to complement meetings.¹³³

Another respondent noted: "For those in Sector North, the female engagement officers are very much protected and barely allowed out".¹³⁴ One civilian mission personnel explained:

We do have female forces deployed, but I think outside of GhanaBatt/GhanBatt, they are on [the] decline, and it's often a token representation when a Force Commander comes out or if there is a high-level meeting.¹³⁵

Other respondents noted that female engagement teams were used only when there were WPS and gender activities, and that, in many cases, this was only when the former civilian WPS advisor was in place and "very much pushed the agenda".

Other respondents noted that female engagement teams were used only when there were WPS and gender activities, and that, in many cases, this was only when the former civilian WPS advisor was in place and "very much pushed the agenda". Since that advisor left, there has been some use of the gender engagement officers, but it is not seen as part of the mission's overall approach to WPS or a holistic approach that can also connect with aspects such as PoC and protection. As one senior UNISFA staff member indicated, "the reality now is that this thematic area is in decline and we are forced to make it everyone's role, but it's not clear that everyone understands this".¹³⁶ The respondent went on to note that "since the mission lost its champion on these issues, it has become more difficult for us to strategically make headway or create systematic efforts to support women".¹³⁷ Another respondent noted that, from their own assessment, the

¹³³ Interview 012, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

¹³⁴ Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Interview 001, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

¹³⁷ Ibid.



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over-focus on benchmarks means that gender, WPS, and other thematic areas will fall to the wayside as they now need to deliver based on the new benchmarks.

While everyone keeps to their individual mandate, this results in a lack of synergy between departments on WPS. Personnel were seeking support from the CLO, who supports UNPOL. They provided guidance on a way forward in helping, for example, “find missing women or those abducted”.

The mission’s inconsistent approach to female engagement means that some sectors are approaching the issues from their own home context rather than the context where they are deployed. For example, the Sector North TCC head said: “our female engagement office does not go out alone”.¹³⁸ The TCCs in this sector also do provide protection for firewood, and they do not deploy female-only patrols, except during special events. The different approaches by the three different TCCs result in the mission not having a unified approach based on needs.

¹³⁸ Interview 012, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

Furthermore, TCCs in the south seem to deploy female-only and WPS engagement platoons, which are “a mixed group not only for CIMIC, but also for protection and wider security information”. As a respondent noted, “the approach has allowed us to achieve broader engagement”, whereby “our all-female patrols get closer to the vulnerable groups and engage with females”.¹³⁹ Where previously support came “through the gender advisor, [they] now go through a gender focal point”.¹⁴⁰ Overall, it was not clear that, beyond the female engagement officers, the mission has a strategy for how it wanted to approach WPS, with many at the senior leadership level appearing confused about what to do. It was acknowledged that the recruitment freeze, which did not lead to the appointment of a WPS and Gender Officer, has significantly left the mission in “disarray and unable to pivot in these areas”.¹⁴¹

What appears to be working is the focal point links with communities and “how this can feed into early warning signs”. However, when questioned further about the use of this information, there seem to be significant challenges in the overall approach.

Women’s Representation in Community Structures

According to one respondent, UNISFA relies on UNPOL and the TCCs, who have gender focal points to communicate on WPS within the communities, especially through the CLOs. However, as one respondent noted, there are at times challenges in adopting an integrated approach in the area of WPS. Without guidance from a mission gender unit or a mission-wide WPS policy, synergies can be lost. While everyone keeps to their individual mandate, this results in a lack of synergy between departments on WPS. Personnel were seeking support from the CLO, who supports UNPOL. They provided guidance on a way forward in helping, for example, “find missing women or those abducted”. However, this does not seem to be the case across the mission on gender and WPS. CIMIC activities try to engage with the women and other residents, but it is not systematically carried out.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Interview 013, UNISFA, May 25, 2026.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Interview 014, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

¹⁴² Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

The interviews reveal that the mission had adopted integrated civilian patrols in September 2025. However, an interviewee stated:

[The] approach was not always effective, as sometimes we have to push to go to areas we need to see as part of our WPS work, but the military does not want to go to these places as it's not a part of the pre-agreed areas of coverage.¹⁴³

The respondent further added: “the military will give us two slots to go to, and so it's very limited, as it could be three weeks before we go”. However, according to another respondent, this aspect did not fully capture the true essence of the integrated approach. They noted: “at the patrol planning meeting, the chief operations office will decide on the number of patrols, but most of this is decided before the integrated meeting takes place, which is just designed to inform SGBV cases”.¹⁴⁴ A third respondent said that the Force Gender Advisor is a medical doctor, but this is not a WPS aspect.¹⁴⁵ Thus, the question was not about her capability but where her skills could be best utilised.

“We made some good impact with the former gender adviser, but when it comes to understanding of WPS, the mission is lacking in concept but also implementation”. For example, “some of the areas where people are located are far, and it's not easy to get to, and so the effectiveness is reduced”.

Support for Women Peace Actors

Protection is about being able to “cultivate, collect firewood, protect our animals in the forest areas, or when we are moving to and from”.¹⁴⁶ Across the mission, while the approach to PoC needs to be synchronised, it also appears that across the military and police, there are challenges with not only the approach to WPS, but the overall role in engaging collectively on WPS matters. One respondent noted: “We are from different components with very different approaches, and most of the CPC and JPC are illiterate and have no formal education, so we have to build them up”, which has made engagement on WPS difficult.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Interview 014, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

¹⁴⁶ Interview 006, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

¹⁴⁷ Interview 014, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

What appears to be working is the focal point links with communities and “how this can feed into early warning signs”.¹⁴⁸ However, when questioned further about the use of this information, there seem to be significant challenges in the overall approach. The information is supposed to go to the mission head, and action is taken to ensure the mission goes on patrols and takes other appropriate action. A respondent stated:

[...] the chain of command makes things hard, but the personal relationship between [the] gender officer, UNPOL, and military engagement advisor could have been improved.

Nevertheless, the military needs to go through the “Force Chief of Staff [FCOS] to get things done, but it’s more personal relations that make this work”.¹⁴⁹ While these tasks are intended to inform how TCCs conduct WPS engagement with communities, in reality, there is a mismatch. WPS and PoC are not effective due to the way in which the mission is engaging on the matter. A respondent said: “We made some good impact with the former gender adviser, but when it comes to understanding of WPS, the mission is lacking in concept but also implementation”. For example, “some of the areas where people are located are far, and it’s not easy to get to, and so the effectiveness is reduced”. Other respondents noted that “in some cases UNPOL has to borrow from the military to go and visit areas”.¹⁵⁰ The matter is made worse because in many of the distant rural areas, women are left alone, and there is no way of getting justice in cases of both domestic abuse and abuse behaviours from non-state actors. However, the lines are blurred between the gender officer with UNPOL and the military advisors, creating a level of central confusion and tension. “We are not sensitive to the gender aspect; even when the mission has its conference, it tends to be all men, and this does not transfer to PoC and protection work”, according to a respondent.¹⁵¹ Overall, it appears that the mission’s approach to WPS and gender mainstreaming is less systematic, diverse, and inclusive of people’s voices, contexts, and situations, and more a matter of conviction than of complementarity in the engagement with WPS and PoC, and in how WPS is carried out across the mission.

148 Ibid.

149 Interview 014, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

150 Ibid.

151 Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.



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6. Responding to the Evolving Security Situation

Early Warning and Early Response

UNISFA remains a critical deterrent actor, but deterrence through dialogue is not enough; it needs to connect to a broader PoC and protection tools and approach. There was a general sense within the mission that there is no clear understanding of early warning and how it is used, activated and acted upon. A respondent stated:

We know that we are not going to be able to disarm these people, but our aim is to try to get them to hide these arms in public. Early warning is a problem because if you come to the main gate, the TCCs will tell you to stay there and say they need to call their commander, but it takes time to go up the chain of command; by the time the incident is addressed, it has already taken place. Sometimes they will say the commander is not around to respond. We need a quick response when there is a report on the incident.¹⁵²

An example of this happened during the team's visit to Abyei Sector North, which is about 32 km from north to south and covers about 60 per cent of Abyei. While the forces based in this area indicated a significantly low level of criminal activity, respondents from these communities noted several incidents where communities had been taxed and attacked by RSF elements controlling the northern block. They were also confronted with reported protection incidents that had not gone up the chain of command. For example, Figure 6.1 below indicates the number

¹⁵² Interview 003, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

of incidents noted by the forces. It became clear when engaging with these communities that previous Battalion Commanders were more willing to push forward with the early warning information given to the force, which would often lead to action.

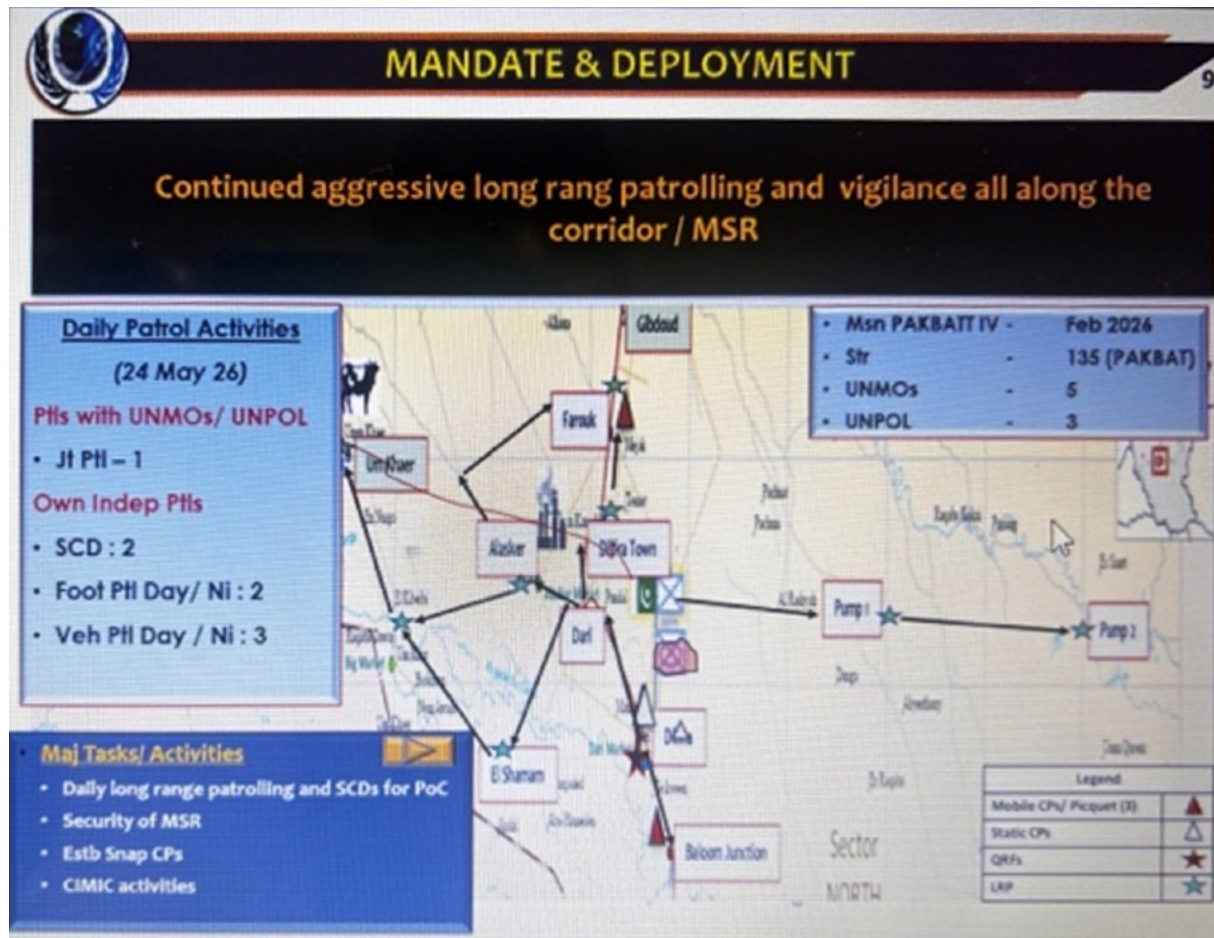
An example of this happened during the team's visit to Abyei Sector North, which is about 32 km from north to south and covers about 60 per cent of Abyei. While the forces based in this area indicated a significantly low level of criminal activity, respondents from these communities noted several incidents where communities had been taxed and attacked by RSF elements controlling the northern block.

Figure 6.1: Major incidents in Sector North

Major crime and incidents - Last year	
Murder	7 February at Al Radiyah
	23 April at Dari
Stabbing	16 February at Dari
	26 March at Dari
Shooting	10 April at Gibdud
	30 May at Dari
	25 July at Dari
Rape	25 March at Dari
January to date	
Shooting	22 January at Dari

When the force was asked about the low incident levels, the response was: “we have only had one incident in 2026”. However, further data from the mission shows that this is not the case. Some TCCs receive the information before events occur or when communities flag incidents after they occur. Nevertheless, in some cases, the forces are not responding, or they ignore critical information which can and should feature in the mission's overall early warning and early response mechanisms.

Figure 6.2: Patrol data from along the MSR



Source: PAKBATT 4; UNISFA

More crucially, it seems that lessons from the 2023 engagement may not have been learnt and the issues have not been addressed. For example, the same forces indicated during our brief meeting: “we aggressively patrol along the MSR”.¹⁵³

Figure 6.2 indicates the type of patrols being conducted. However, even along the MSR, the team observed no active patrolling up to Diffra and down towards UNISFAS HQ, although officials stated that patrols were conducted. The large number of trucks passing between Abyei and Sudan do not seem to be searched for weapons or fuel. When asked by the team about the issue, it was noted: “on average, only two a day pass through our guarded MSR”. Nevertheless, the team noted over five large trucks on the road to Diffra and another 21 on the way back to UN HQ, and at no point did the forces check these vehicles for weapons.

In Sector Centre, one senior military official stated: “while the mission’s current approach has been to try and ask people to put them away. [...] weapons do move in and out of the Box, but

¹⁵³ Interview 010, UNISFA, May 24, 2026.

they are hidden.” The official continued: “It is also true that if they are called upon, they can quickly be used”. Traffic controls along the MSR are conducted “for humanitarians to be able to move around”. When the matter of patrols was brought up by the team in the Sector Centre, the official’s response was: “Patrols are different when going to the static areas. It’s different from area-dominated patrols [ADPs]. We do about 150 patrols per month.”¹⁵⁴ The use and transmission of data for early warning also appear to be an issue. One respondent indicated that patrol numbers are extremely “overinflated and often not aligned with basic measurements of the Box and sectors”.¹⁵⁵ The challenge here is that while the war in Sudan rages on, Abyei has become weaponised and is acting as an MSR for Sudan’s conflict. This breaks several of the existing sanction regimes in place and complicates the mission’s work in the Box. It further raises concerns about TCC activities and how the hiding of weapons is contributing to instability, not only in the Box, but across the region.

When the matter of patrols was brought up by the team in the Sector Centre, the official’s response was: “Patrols are different when going to the static areas. It’s different from area-dominated patrols [ADPs]. We do about 150 patrols per month.”

It was also clear that language appears to be an issue, not only communication in the local language but in the use of UN-approved languages, which impacts some TCCs’ ability to engage with communities on matters of early warning and their overall response to PoC and protection. Some TCCs acknowledged that information gaps, language and culture, and limited freedom of movement were issues. From the communities’ perspective, TCCs were not using the information given to them and often not factoring in changes in the Box, including the movement of people and armed groups in and out of the Box. However, at mission leadership level, there was awareness of this issue.¹⁵⁶

Adaptation and Operational Challenges

UNISFA is operating in an increasingly demanding environment characterised by evolving security threats, heightened community expectations, and declining resources. A recurring concern raised by interviewees was the growing disconnect between the mission’s mandate and its capacity to deliver. As one respondent noted, “we cannot do more with less”.¹⁵⁷ Resource reductions have forced the mission to make difficult choices regarding priorities, creating concerns

¹⁵⁴ Interview 012, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

¹⁵⁵ Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

¹⁵⁶ Interview 001, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

that cross-cutting agendas such as WPS and child protection may become secondary to immediate security imperatives. These issues are not effectively integrated into mission planning; thus, respondents expressed concern that unsustainable funding and staffing constraints would undermine meaningful implementation over time.

Resource reductions have forced the mission to make difficult choices regarding priorities, creating concerns that cross-cutting agendas such as WPS and child protection may become secondary to immediate security imperatives.

Despite these challenges, the mission has undertaken efforts to improve coordination and operational adaptability. A notable development has been the increased integration between mission components involved in information gathering, analysis, and operational planning. Historically, JMAC faced limitations in conducting targeted information collection and translating analysis into operational responses. More recently, however, respondents pointed to the creation of integrated planning mechanisms that bring together JMAC, CLOs, the Force unit-to-sector (U2S), TCC sector-to-sector (S2S), and the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS).

Respondents pointed to the creation of integrated planning mechanisms that bring together JMAC, CLOs, the Force unit-to-sector (U2S), TCC sector-to-sector (S2S), and the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS).

The introduction of integrated patrol planning in August 2025, which evolved into a broader joint planning process several weeks later, represents an important step towards a more coordinated approach to threat analysis and protection planning.¹⁵⁸ Interviewees also highlighted efforts to strengthen information flows and situational awareness across the mission. The incorporation of CLO-generated information into planning processes has helped improve understanding of community concerns and local dynamics. Nevertheless, institutional coordination remains uneven. Several respondents noted that structures do not function as a fully integrated, round-the-clock system. While the JOC functions round the clock, the Security Operations Centre (SOC) does not. Ideally, these platforms would bring together military, police, UNPOL, and civilian components to support real-time operational decision-making. While improvements have been made, gaps in coordination and information sharing continue to affect responsiveness.

¹⁵⁸ Interview 005, UNISFA, May 23, 2026.

Operational Constraints

Interviewees acknowledged key successes, but they consistently identified operational constraints as a principal factor limiting mission effectiveness. Resource reductions were frequently cited as a major concern. Funding for joint programmes has reportedly declined significantly from US\$1 million to US\$500 000,¹⁵⁹ limiting the mission's ability to support community-focused initiatives, confidence-building measures, and preventive engagement activities that complement traditional protection efforts.

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Beyond resource constraints, respondents highlighted performance variations among TCCs, which might be due to sector-specific factors, threats and environments. Although mobility and the ability of contingents to operate across the Abyei Area have improved, perceptions persist that some contingents are more willing to deploy and engage than others. Several respondents suggested that terrain and mobility challenges are sometimes overstated as explanations for limited operational reach. While environmental conditions undoubtedly affect movement, interviewees noted that some contingents consistently demonstrate greater responsiveness and flexibility than others in similar circumstances.

Concerns were also raised regarding situational awareness at the sector level. In some instances, respondents described situations in which military contingents appeared unaware of incidents occurring within their AOR. Such information gaps have implications for both protection and early warning responses, particularly in a context where communities increasingly assess the mission's ability to react quickly to emerging threats.

A related challenge concerns the balance between military and civilian approaches to protection. Several interviewees argued that PoC should not be understood solely in terms of troop deployments and patrols. Rather, effective protection requires sustained engagement with communities, stronger civilian capacities, and greater investment in local relationships. Respondents therefore advocated for enhanced civilian leadership structures, including the appointment of a

¹⁵⁹ Interview 001, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

DHoM,¹⁶⁰ capable of complementing military efforts and strengthening the mission's engagement with social, governance and protection issues.¹⁶¹

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The limited discussion of extensive foot patrols was also notable. While vehicle patrols remain central to mission operations, respondents frequently associated effective protection with visible, routine engagement at the community level. The absence of a consistent ground presence in some areas contributes to perceptions of distance between the mission and the populations it is mandated to protect. As one respondent observed, the longer it takes for the mission to reach communities following an incident, the greater the risk that local trust and confidence will erode.¹⁶²

Political Sensitivities

Many respondents argued that the most significant challenges facing UNISFA are ultimately political rather than operational. The Abyei region remains shaped by unresolved political questions, shifting regional dynamics, and the absence of effective state institutions. These broader political realities have direct implications for protection, stability, and mission legitimacy.

The conflict in Sudan has intensified existing pressures and further complicated the political environment. Respondents repeatedly noted that the effective absence of both governments from significant parts of Abyei has left critical gaps in governance, the rule of law, and service delivery.¹⁶³ In this context, UNISFA is often expected to perform functions that extend beyond its traditional peacekeeping role and mandate. However, security interventions alone cannot compensate for the absence of functioning political and administrative institutions.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Interview 004, UNISFA, May 22, 2026.

Several interviewees emphasised that the mission has historically been viewed through a predominantly military lens. Yet there is growing recognition that military responses alone are insufficient to address the underlying drivers of insecurity.¹⁶⁴ Current leadership was widely perceived as more aware of the need to complement military activities with social, political, and community-centred approaches. The inclusion of CLOs in patrol planning processes was frequently cited as an example of this evolving mindset, reflecting efforts to integrate local perspectives into operational decision-making.¹⁶⁵

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At the same time, respondents argued that the mission requires a stronger political capacity to address the increasingly complex environment. Suggestions included establishing specialised units focused on political analysis and conflict dynamics and strengthening senior civilian leadership by appointing a deputy chief of staff or DHoM. Such measures were viewed as essential to addressing the political dimensions of protection and ensuring that operational responses are informed by broader contextual understanding. Expectations of PoC continue to evolve, while confidence in traditional understandings of protection appears to be weakening. If communities perceive that protection commitments are not matched by tangible outcomes, the mission may face growing challenges in maintaining trust and legitimacy. Consequently, addressing political sensitivities and community expectations will be as important to UNISFA's future effectiveness as addressing operational constraints on the ground.

¹⁶⁴ Interview 002, UNISFA, May 21, 2026.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

7. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study highlights continuing uncertainty regarding what protection means in practice and how communities evaluate protection outcomes. UNISFA continues to play an indispensable role in maintaining stability in Abyei. Across interviews, community members and leaders consistently recognised the mission as a critical deterrent to large-scale violence. They acknowledged that its presence has helped prevent further deterioration in the security situation, particularly since the 2022 violence. Despite frustrations with aspects of mission performance, respondents broadly agreed that the absence of UNISFA would likely create a significant security vacuum with serious consequences for civilians.

There is a growing disconnect between community expectations and the mission's capacity to respond to evolving threats. While EW mechanisms exist and community members continue to share information with the mission, response capacities remain uneven across sectors and are often constrained by limited resources, mobility challenges, infrastructure deficiencies, and a complex security environment. Communities continue to assess the mission primarily on its ability to provide effective protection, particularly in rural and peripheral areas where insecurity remains most acute.

However, meaningful community engagement remains one of UNISFA's greatest strengths. Where engagement is sustained, communities report higher levels of trust, greater acceptance of the mission, and a stronger willingness to cooperate on security and protection issues. Nonetheless, these gains remain vulnerable if communities perceive that information shared with the mission does not translate into visible action or improved protection outcomes.

With respect to the WPS agenda, progress is evident but uneven. Although awareness has increased within the mission, implementation remains inconsistent across components and sectors. Women's participation in local peace and security structures remains limited, and representation challenges within both community institutions and mission leadership continue to undermine perceptions of inclusivity. WPS cannot be pursued as a standalone agenda. Rather, participation, prevention, and protection are deeply interconnected and depend on broader efforts to strengthen community trust, local security mechanisms, and inclusive governance.

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A significant challenge identified throughout the study is the lack of legitimate local institutions capable of assuming greater responsibility for security, administration, and community protection. As resource constraints continue to affect both the mission and humanitarian actors, long-term stability will increasingly depend on strengthening local capacities, enhancing community-based protection mechanisms, and investing in sustainable governance structures.

Community consultations reveal a pervasive sense of uncertainty about Abyei's future. Concerns about the territory's unresolved political status, the presence of armed actors, declining humanitarian support, and shifting regional dynamics have fuelled anxiety about what lies ahead. Many respondents expressed support for complementing the mission's military leadership with stronger civilian political engagement to address the governance, development, and political dimensions of the Abyei question.

Ultimately, UNISFA remains necessary and valued, but sustaining its effectiveness will require adapting to changing realities on the ground. Strengthening community-centred protection, enhancing responsiveness, deepening WPS implementation, and building local institutional capacity will be critical to ensuring the mission remains fit for purpose in an increasingly uncertain environment.

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capacity will be critical to ensuring the mission remains fit for purpose in an increasingly uncertain environment. Against this background, the following recommendations are put forward.

Recommendations

Strengthen Community-Based Early Warning and Response Mechanisms

- UNISFA should deepen partnerships with community structures, including CPCs, women's groups, youth networks, traditional leaders, and local authorities, to strengthen information sharing and improve early warning systems. Attention should be given to ensuring that alerts are linked to visible, timely responses, thereby increasing community confidence in the system.

Enhance Rapid Response Capabilities in High-Risk Areas

- The mission should review force deployment patterns, patrol schedules, and operational procedures to improve responsiveness to emerging threats, particularly in Amiet Market and in rural and peripheral areas. Greater decentralisation of personnel and assets, together with improved mobility and road access, would help address persistent protection gaps identified by communities.

Institutionalise Mission-Wide WPS Accountability

- WPS should be embedded across all mission components rather than remaining primarily the responsibility of gender advisers or specialised units. UNISFA should develop clear accountability frameworks, performance indicators, and reporting requirements to enable all civilian, police, and military components to demonstrate their contributions to WPS objectives.
- Targeted equity measures are necessary. Such measures may include reserved seats or quotas for women, alternative nomination pathways through women's organisations and civil society, leadership development initiatives, equal access to stipends and operational support, and sustained capacity-building programmes in leadership. These interventions are not intended to provide preferential treatment but to compensate for historical exclusion, remove practical barriers to participation, and ensure that women can contribute meaningfully and sustainably to peace and security decision-making processes.

- Historically, women have not been part of these traditional leadership or security structures. Consequently, if selection into peace and security mechanisms is based solely on these existing pipelines, women will continue to be underrepresented. Women's inclusion in decision-making structures in Abyei requires deliberate equity measures, rather than relying solely on equal representation. This is because the institutions from which many decision-makers are traditionally drawn have historically excluded women. For example, the JCPC is composed of individuals selected from long-established community leadership structures. On the Ngok Dinka side, members are predominantly drawn from the traditional leadership system, including chiefs and elders. On the Misseriya side, many members have backgrounds in the former Popular Defence Forces (PDF), typically having served at ranks ranging from Captain to Lieutenant Colonel. Similarly, the CPCs are largely composed of individuals drawn from the security sectors of both Sudan and South Sudan.

Promote Inclusive Security Dialogue Through Women's Participation and Male Allyship

- Efforts to increase women's participation in local peace and security processes should be accompanied by deliberate engagement with male community leaders, traditional authorities, and security actors. Building male allies can help reduce resistance to women's inclusion and support the gradual transformation of exclusionary decision-making structures.

Invest in Local Security and Governance Capacities

- Given the long-term need for sustainable protection arrangements, UNISFA should expand its support for local policing, community protection mechanisms, conflict-resolution structures, and administrative institutions. Capacity-building efforts should focus on enabling local actors to progressively assume greater responsibility for security and governance while remaining accountable to local communities.

Strengthen the Civilian and Political Dimensions of Mission Engagement

- There is a growing demand for stronger civilian leadership and political engagement within Abyei. UNISFA, together with relevant stakeholders, should explore mechanisms to enhance civilian expertise and political engagement. This will complement military efforts, support dialogue, address governance challenges, and help communities navigate uncertainty about Abyei's future status.

8. Annexure A

Table A1: Operational paragraphs (OPs) for the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism (JBVMM) mandate extension

JBVMM Mandate Extension	
OP 3	Decides to extend UNISFA’s mandate modification under Resolution 2024 (2011) and paragraph 1 of Resolution 2075 (2012) until 15 November 2026, in support of the JBVMM, contingent upon JBVMM’s full operationalisation and sustained host state cooperation
Border Demarcation Benchmarks	
OP 4	Determines that both parties must demonstrate measurable progress, including: 1. Full freedom of movement for all air and ground UNISFA and JBVMM patrols 2. Operationalise team site at Abu Qussa and Wunkur; resolve challenges at Gok Machar, Safaha and Kiir Adem, and Sumayah and War Abar 3. Convene two JPSM meetings and widely disseminate conclusions 4. Immediately withdraw from the Safe Demilitarised Border Zone (SDBZ) per October 2020 JPSM commitment; notify UNISFA for verification 5. Operationalise border crossing corridors per decisions from October 2020 and September 2021 JPSM meetings 6. Develop a detailed work plan and budget for demarcation; hold two Joint Demarcation Committee meetings 7. Maintain deployment of national monitors to JBVMM operations
Troop Ceiling	
OP 5	Decides to maintain the authorised troop ceiling of 3,250 until 15 November 2026

Police Ceiling	
OP 6	Maintains the authorised police ceiling at 640 personnel (148 individual police and corrections officers and three Formed Police Units). Expresses intention to reduce the ceiling as the Abyei Police Service is gradually established
Humanitarian Access	
OP 25	Demands all parties allow—in accordance with international law and IHL—full, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access to civilians and protection of all UN and associated humanitarian personnel, consistent with UN humanitarian principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence), and in line with UNSC Resolution 2730 (2024)

Table A2: Operative clauses (actions)

A. Actions Directed at Sudan and South Sudan	
OP 7	Strongly urges full support to UNISFA's mandate implementation; prompt and full deployment of UNISFA personnel, including police; immediate removal of all unauthorised forces; freedom of movement; uninterrupted supply of food, medicine, and supplies
OP 9	Urgently requests authorisation of Athony Airport use with flight clearances and basing arrangements to reduce costs, facilitate MEDEVAC and air cargo, and enhance safety (per Resolution 2518 (2020))
OP 16	Condemns and strongly urges immediate and unconditional withdrawal of SSPDF, other South Sudan security service personnel, and RSF from the demilitarised Abyei Area in violation of the 2011 Agreement
OP 20	Urges implementation of confidence-building measures with full women's and youth participation; advance joint investigations into violence in Kolem, Mabok, and Dunguop
OP 24	Call upon all Member States (especially Sudan and South Sudan) to ensure free, unhindered, and expeditious movement of all UNISFA personnel and equipment; remove bureaucratic and administrative restrictions
OP 28	Strongly urges all parties to cease all violence, human rights violations, IHL violations against civilians, including women and children; bring perpetrators to justice
B. Actions Directed at UNISFA and the Secretary-General	
OP 2	Requests the Secretary-General to provide semi-annual updates on progress against benchmarks; signals intent to withdraw or reconfigure mission if no substantial progress
OP 10	Requests the Secretary-General, Member States, and all parties to ensure safety, security, and freedom of movement of UNISFA personnel; implement resolution 2589 (2021) on accountability for crimes against peacekeepers
OP 11	Stresses the request to the Secretary-General to urgently appoint a civilian Deputy Head of Mission (DHoM) and add civilian staff within existing resources to facilitate liaison
OP 15	Underscores UNISFA's PoC mandate (per OP 3 of Res. 1990); peacekeepers authorised to use all necessary means, including force, to protect civilians under imminent threat; stresses the need for early warning, community engagement, and counter-disinformation
OP 17	Reaffirms UNISFA's authority to conduct weapons confiscation and destruction per resolution 1990 (2011) in coordination with AJOC and communities; calls upon parties to extend full cooperation
OP 29	Requests the Secretary-General to ensure effective monitoring of human rights violations and IHL violations (including sexual violence against women and girls); reiterates call on Sudan and South Sudan to issue visas for relevant UN personnel

C. Actions Directed at UNISFA	
OP 30(a)	Strengthen mission-wide early warning and response strategy integrating information gathering, incident tracking, threat analysis, and incorporating women's and girls' perspectives
(b)	Employ confidence-building, mediation, and strategic communications to support protection and situational awareness
(c)	Prioritise mission mobility and active patrolling in areas of emerging protection risks, including sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV); deploy forces with appropriate air and land assets
(d)	Reiterate importance of peacekeeping-intelligence and surveillance capacities within mandate limits
(e)	Improve logistics and secure UNISFA's logistical supply routes
(f)	Implement effective casualty and MEDEVAC procedures, including decentralised casualty evacuation SOPs; deploy enhanced medical evacuation capacities
(g)	Take active measures for safety and security facilities and arrangements
(h)	Secure long-term rotation schemes for critical capabilities; explore innovative partnership options with contributing countries
(i)	Consider environmental impacts of operations; manage in accordance with UN Environment Strategy for Peace Operations 2023–2030 (including renewable energy transition, waste and water reduction)
(j)	Ensure support to non-UN security forces complies with the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP), including monitoring and mitigating measures
(k)	Prioritise mandated protection activities in all resource allocation decisions (per Resolution 1894 (2009))
(l)	Strengthen SGBV prevention and response per Resolution 2467 (2019); integrate SGBV risks into data collection, threat analysis, and early warning; engage survivors ethically
(m)	Strengthen and diversify community engagement, public information, and sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) reporting mechanisms
(n)	Implement Resolution 1325 (2000) and all WPS resolutions as a crosscutting issue; deploy gender advisors and gender focal points
(o)	Mainstream child protection as a crosscutting issue
(p)	Implement youth, peace and security priorities per Resolutions 2250, 2419, and 2535
(q)	Implement peacekeeping performance requirements per Resolutions 2378 and 2436
(r)	Implement UN zero-tolerance policy on SEA and sexual harassment per Resolution 2272; report misconduct to the Security Council
D. Reporting Requirements	
OP 34	Requests the Secretary-General to provide evidence-based, data-driven reports using CPAS on: African Union (AU) and AU High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) political mediation; Special Envoy efforts; visa issuance progress; DHoM appointment; Athony Airport usage; police establishment; JPSM resumption; unauthorised forces withdrawal; human rights monitoring; Joint Programme Initiative; mission performance improvement; IPPAF and CPAS implementation—in combined written reports on 1 May 2026 and 15 October 2026
OP 35	Requests the Secretary-General to report by 31 August 2026 on the security situation and demonstrable progress toward benchmarks in OP 1; provide a comprehensive assessment of the security implications of the potential drawdown

Table A3: Non-binding recommendations

A. Political Process and Mediation	
OP 8	Encourages stronger Sudan–South Sudan cooperation on peace, security, and stability, including support to the Juba Peace Agreement and resumption of JPSM meetings
OP 12	Urges continued progress toward establishing temporary administrative and security arrangements agreed by both parties
OP 13	Encourages the AU, AUHIP, and the UN Special Envoy (Horn of Africa) to intensify mediation and coordination efforts with Sudan and South Sudan to establish temporary arrangements and achieve a political solution for Abyei; reiterates the request to consult on enhancing the Special Envoy's role
OP 14	Urges renewed efforts to determine the SDBZ centreline; reiterates that the centreline does not prejudice the current or future legal status of the border
OP 23	Calls upon all parties to cooperate with the Abyei Area Joint Investigation and Inquiry Committee findings; looks forward to the AU Commission report on the killing of the Ngok Dinka Paramount Chief as a basis for reconciliation
OP 26	Encourages UNISFA to continue supporting the Abyei UN Joint Programme Initiative
OP 27	Encourages Sudan and South Sudan to facilitate UNMAS deployment for mine clearance and freedom of movement in Abyei and the SDBZ
B. Humanitarian and Protection of Civilians (PoC)	
OP 18	Encourages UNISFA to bolster community dialogue initiatives (Misseriya, Ngok Dinka, Twic Dinka) including women's and youth organisations; invites coordination with Juba, Muglad, and Khartoum-appointed administrations for stability, reconciliation, and displaced persons return
OP 19	Welcomes the UN's development of an integrated Rule-of-Law Support Strategy and encourages all parties to cooperate with UNISFA for establishing the Abyei Police Services
OP 20	Urges Sudan and South Sudan to implement confidence-building measures with full women's and youth participation; urges advancement of the joint investigation announced in 2020 for Kolem violence and accountability for Mabok and Dunguop violence
OP 22	Welcomes UNISFA's efforts to strengthen Community Protection Committees (CPCs) in coordination with the Misseriya and Ngok Dinka communities
OP 33	Notes the Secretary-General's efforts to ensure close cooperation among UN missions and envoys in the region (UNISFA, UNMISS, Personal Envoy for Sudan, Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa)
C. Women, Peace and Security (WPS)	
OP 21	Calls upon all parties to promote full, equal, meaningful, and safe participation of women at all levels of intercommunity dialogue; requests UNISFA to integrate women into peace discussions and facilitate access to local women's organisations (including gender and child protection advisers)
D. Troop- and Police-Contributing Countries	
OP 31	Requests troop- and police-contributing countries (TCCs and PCCs) to fully implement Resolution 2538 (2020) on women's participation in peacekeeping, ensuring safe working environments
OP 32	Urges TCCs and PCCs to prevent SEA, including vetting, pre-deployment training, accountability, and reporting to the UN

9. Annexure B: EPON project summary

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

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

For more information, please contact:

Dr. Cedric de Coning
Research Professor
NUPI Center for UN and Global Governance
cdc@nupi.no | @CedricdeConing | +47 94 24 91 68

Established in 2011, the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) is mandated to maintain peace and security and protect civilians in the Abyei region. Abyei (“The Box”) lies between the disputed borders of Sudan and South Sudan and has faced persistent political uncertainty and insecurity, compounded in recent years by armed incursions, criminal activity, illicit trafficking and complex cross-border dynamics. The ongoing conflict in Sudan has further intensified these pressures, creating governance and security vacuums that affect Abyei’s stability and the protection of civilians.

This joint Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON)–Training for Peace (TfP) report has three primary objectives. First, it provides a comprehensive update on developments in Abyei from 2023 to June 2026. Second, the report examines the implications of emerging armed groups in Abyei and what these changes mean for UNISFA’s mandate, particularly its responsibility to protect civilians and to maintain Abyei as a demilitarised area free from unauthorised armed actors. Lastly, it analyses how UNISFA is adapting to Abyei’s evolving security environment and assesses the mission’s overall response to persistent and emerging violence, insecurity, and instability.



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