

# A Forgotten People in an Unstable Region

The Effectiveness of the United Nations  
Interim Security Force for Abyei

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EPON & TFP Report

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## The Effectiveness of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei

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# Contents

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Acknowledgements	5
1. Executive summary	7
2. Introduction	13
3. History of Abyei	17
UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA)	19
4. Assessing the Effectiveness of UNISFA	21
The Structure and Strength of UNISFA Forces	22
The Transition from Single TCC to UN Multinational Force	25
Patrolling Abyei	30
Civilian aspects of the mission	33
Rising Insecurity in and around Abyei Town and Amiet Market	35
Responsiveness of UNISFA to Insecurity and the Situation on the Ground	40
Responsiveness of UNISFA to Protection of Civilians (PoC) Matters	45
Responsiveness of UNISFA to Mitigating Emerging Violence and New Insecurity	50
Political Situation	51

5.	The Political Impasse: UNISFA, the UNSC and the Mandate	55
	Interaction with Communities	58
	Policing Abyei	59
	The Issue of the Rule of Law	61
	The Joint Mission Analysis Centre (JMAC) Data, Historical Trends and Analysis to Inform Smart Peacekeeping	61
	Early Warning: The Preparedness of the Mission in and out of Season	62
6.	Implementing the Mandate in Practice and Challenges Between the Two Communities	67
	Factors that Enable Activities to Achieve their Intended Impact and Challenges to Implementation	69
	Coordination with UNMISS, UNITAMS and International Partners (AU and IGAD)	71
	Orientation of UNISFA Towards Supporting the National Government and the Local Population	75
7.	Implications for UNISFA's Mandate Renewal and Future Positioning of the Mission	79
	Restructuring UNISFA	82
	Human Rights and the Rule of Law	83
	Socio-economic Recovery	84
	Humanitarian Targets	84
8.	Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)	87
	Benchmarks and Exit Strategy	90
9.	Conclusion and Recommendations	95
	Focusing on mandate priorities	96
	Annexure: The Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) Project summary	99

# 1. Executive summary

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

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

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

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

At the time of writing, the Amiet Common Market appeared to be the only place where the Misseriya and Ngok Dinka communities co-existed within the Abyei box. Security has grown ever more precarious for the people of the region since 2022.<sup>4</sup> The mission continues to face legitimacy crises. Most local communities had a clear understanding of the mission's mandate and interpretation of what and how the mission should be implementing its mandate. However, this understanding did not align (from our assessment) with the mission's own perception of how it should carry out its mandate. This misalignment between the mission and civilians has degenerated into heightened tensions and frequent protests, spiralling into a wedge between the host communities and UNISFA and culminating in the growing mistrust between the local population and the mission. For missions mandated to protect civilians, local perceptions are crucial for effective collaboration, engagement, and the performance of mission-mandated tasks.

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

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

4 Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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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.

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

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



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