



## Security Council

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### Letter dated 17 September 2021 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council

The Security Council, in its resolution [2575 \(2021\)](#), requested that I conduct and provide the Council, no later than 30 September 2021, a strategic review of the United Nations Interim Security Force in Abyei (UNISFA) assessing recent political developments between and within the Sudan and South Sudan and providing detailed recommendations for further reconfiguration of the mission and establishing a viable exit strategy, which should prioritize the safety and security of civilians living in Abyei, account for stability of the region and include an option for an exit strategy for UNISFA that is not limited by the 2011 agreements.

In response to that request, the strategic review was conducted by an integrated team from the Department of Peace Operations, the Department of Operational Support, the Department of Safety and Security, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and the Office of the Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa. Representatives from the United Nations country teams in the Sudan and South Sudan were also consulted. The team travelled to the Sudan, South Sudan and Ethiopia from 18 to 30 June. They met with high-level government officials in Khartoum, Juba and Addis Ababa, including representatives from the African Union, and engaged with the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities in the Abyei area.

The strategic review was conducted at a critical juncture for the Sudan and South Sudan, as both countries have been undergoing political transitions. It also followed regional consultations held by my Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa in February and March 2021 on the drawdown and exit strategy of UNISFA, as mandated by the Security Council in its resolution [2550 \(2020\)](#). The environment in which the strategic review took place was influenced by three main developments. First, the noticeably improved relations between the Sudan and South Sudan since 2019, particularly in view of the central role they have been playing in each other's peace processes. This has created an enabling environment to address outstanding issues, including the final status of Abyei. The second development is the lack of tangible progress in the implementation of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement on temporary arrangements for the administration and security of the Abyei Area and in the implementation of resolutions in which the Security Council has been calling for progress in the political process and the establishment of rule of law institutions. As a result, a number of pending issues have been left for UNISFA to address over the past decade, including humanitarian, law and order, security and administrative concerns. Last, the current dynamics in the relations between Ethiopia and the Sudan are having a direct impact on UNISFA and its perception by the parties. As I indicated in my letter to the Council



on 1 April 2021 (S/2021/322), the regional consultations conducted by my Special Envoy in February and March 2021 were inconclusive.

Previous strategic reviews had proposed changes in the Security Council mandate and reconfigurations of the mission, with limited success. Most notably, in August 2018, I recommended moving away from the strictly military nature of the mission towards a civilian approach, noting that the threat within Abyei was mostly criminal in nature (see S/2018/778). In that regard, the proposal was to transfer troops from the Abyei area to fully operationalize the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism and to deploy additional police personnel in the Abyei area to address law and order issues. In the proposal I also noted the need to support the African Union, particularly the African Union High-level Implementation Panel, on day-to-day implementation of the agreements through an enhanced civilian component, including a deputy civilian head of mission. On 14 May 2019, in its resolution 2469 (2019), the Council renewed the mandate of UNISFA with some modifications in the troop levels, including a reduction of the authorized troop ceiling to 3,550 and a further reduction of 585 troops unless it decided to extend the mandate of the Mechanism (resolution 2465 (2019)). The mission was to increase the police deployment to 640, including 148 individual police officers and 3 formed police units. In addition, the Council called for the appointment of a civilian deputy head of mission to further facilitate liaison between and engagement with the parties. The deployment of the formed police units, the increase in the number of individual police officers from 50 to 148 and the placement of the civilian deputy head of mission have not been implemented to date owing to objections from the Sudanese authorities on the grounds that the modifications were not in line with the 2011 agreements.

## Framing the issues

The review drew from the strategic guidance of the Security Council and some of the findings and recommendations of previous reviews.

With that in mind, the strategic review team formulated the following questions in order to frame the issues:

- (a) What are the alternatives to the current peacekeeping approach in Abyei?
- (b) In the absence of a political solution, are there any practical solutions by the Sudan and South Sudan to the outstanding issues of administration and rule of law of the Abyei area?
- (c) What can the Sudan and South Sudan do to assume the current role of the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism?
- (d) How can UNISFA be reconfigured to adjust to current political developments in the region and crime-related security threats, considering the stability of the region and the safety and security of civilians living in Abyei, including measures to protect against gender-based violence?
- (e) What is the required operational support for the proposed reconfiguration? Options need to include consideration of the related time frames and financial implications required to logistically support significant changes to posture, size and/or composition of the Force and the unique operational circumstances;
- (f) What steps can the parties take to move the political process forward?
- (g) What would an exit of UNISFA imply in terms of practical steps and in terms of timelines?

## Improved relations: communities far apart

National authorities in the Sudan and South Sudan expressed strong commitment to leveraging their improved relations for the solution of outstanding political issues, including residual matters from the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Sudan People's Liberation Army. Both countries are undergoing political transitions and there is an appreciation by the respective Governments of the challenges that transition processes pose for tackling issues of national interest. Progress was recently made on the establishment of an engagement framework towards reaching a solution on the status of Abyei. On 25 May 2021, the President of South Sudan, Salva Kiir, established a 10-member high-level committee, chaired by the Presidential Adviser on National Security, Tut Gatluak. A similar committee was established in Khartoum, composed of 19 members and chaired by the Vice-President of the Sovereign Council of the Sudan, General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. Both Governments have also expressed an interest in possibly exploring an option for a Sudan-South Sudan joint security force for the area, with differences on the timing of its deployment.

In Khartoum and Juba, all parties have acknowledged the need to preserve UNISFA until a political solution is found, and the Sudan is requesting the establishment of a United Nations multinational force.

The Sudan supports the establishment of the joint institutions foreseen in the Agreement of 20 June 2011 and views the proposed joint security forces with South Sudan as a solution to the provision of security in Abyei in the medium to long terms. South Sudan, while being appreciative of the role of UNISFA and satisfied with the current troop contributing country, considers that more clarity is required on the larger political framework before the establishment of a joint security force. Both countries support an increased role of the United Nations in consolidating peace, particularly through the scaling up of humanitarian activities, peacebuilding activities and development assistance at the community level.

Inside Abyei, the space for engagement between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities is shrinking. The Amiet common market and the transhumance season constitute two enduring loci of interaction in an otherwise divided space. However, the conference on migration routes was held outside the Abyei area, in Aweil, South Sudan, from 22 to 25 February 2021.

The views of the communities on the present situation and their expectations of UNISFA and the United Nations country team are quite divergent. Interlocutors of the Ngok Dinka community, including women representatives, told the strategic review team that the resolution of the final status of the Abyei area, as agreed in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was of primary importance. They praised UNISFA for maintaining security, believed that the Misseriya did not belong in the area and opposed the United Nations country team's programme in support of the Misseriya, perceiving this as supporting the efforts of the Misseriya to resettle the latter in an area belonging to the Ngok Dinka. The Misseriya representatives expressed frustration with the lack of services in the health and education sectors and access in the area, and questioned the impartiality of UNISFA as they believed the mission was siding with the Ngok Dinka. The youth groups in both communities tended to be more vocal. The positions of the communities also reflected in the absence of joint governance structures in the area, with both parties having separately appointed chief administrators without any visible coordination.

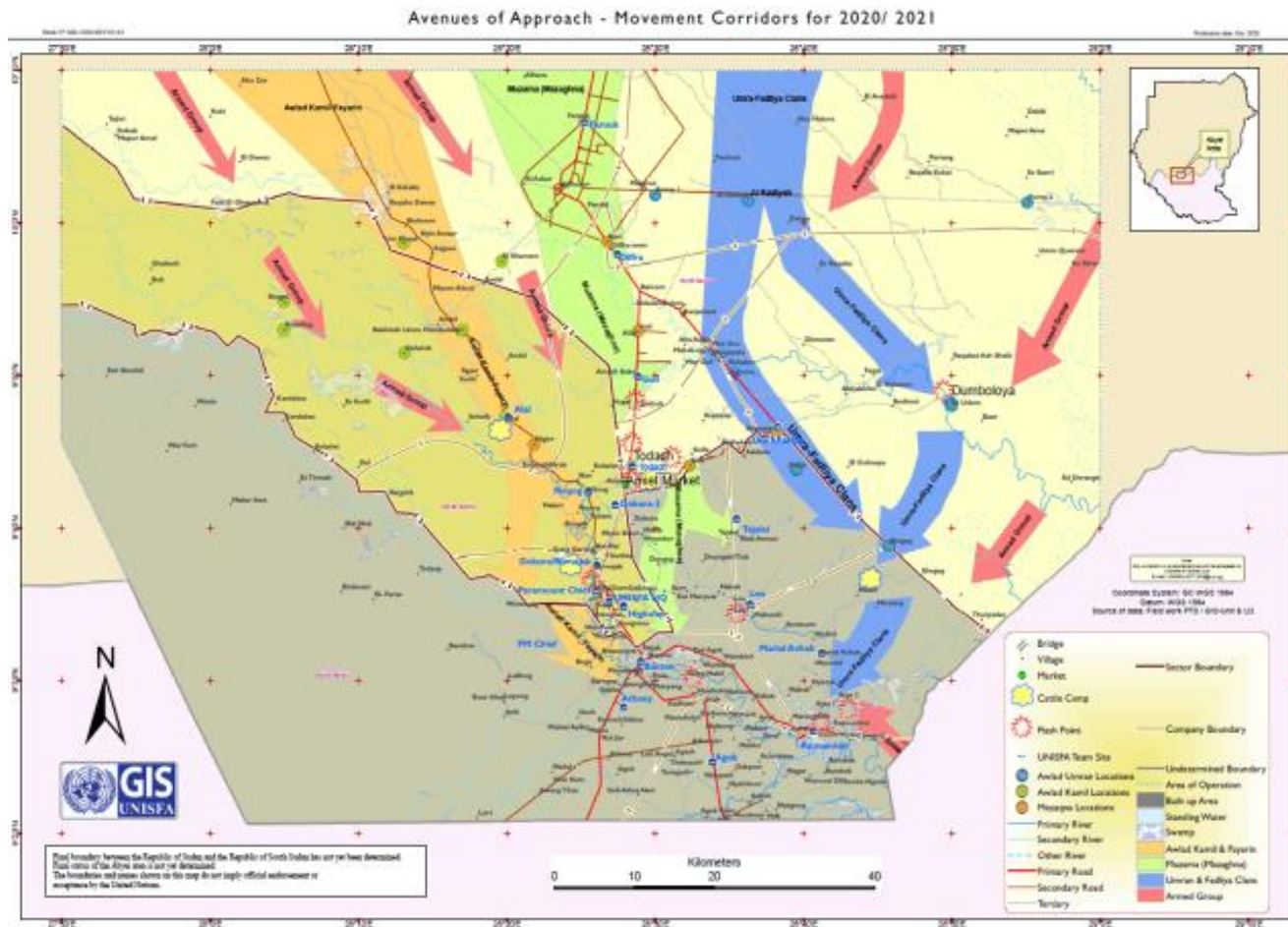
## Changed context

The political and security context has significantly improved and evolved since the initial deployment of the interim force in the area a decade ago. The trends identified since the independent review of UNISFA in 2018 continue to prevail in an encouraging political environment at the national level. The political transitions in the Sudan and South Sudan have improved political dynamics between the two countries and have created conditions for them to contribute to each other's peace processes. The parties are unanimous in acknowledging the stabilizing role of UNISFA in Abyei and along the border between the Sudan and South Sudan. In the present environment, despite the lack of a political settlement, it is highly unlikely that the Governments of the Sudan and South Sudan will try to address their differences through military confrontation in Abyei.

The recurring incidents in the area continued to be of a criminal nature. Some were intercommunal clashes over grazing, water points and cattle rustling, and others were related to the presence of armed elements. For example, in the period between January and June 2020, cases of assault and theft constituted 751 out of a total of 810 incidents, and in the period between January and May 2021, the same categories constituted 946 cases out of a total of 989 incidents. Between May 2020 and June 2021, there were 27 cases involving the presence of armed elements that were suspected of having participated in cattle rustling and armed robbery. The majority of incidents have tended to be seasonal, as they have occurred between January and May or June, coinciding with the dry season and the transhumance movement.

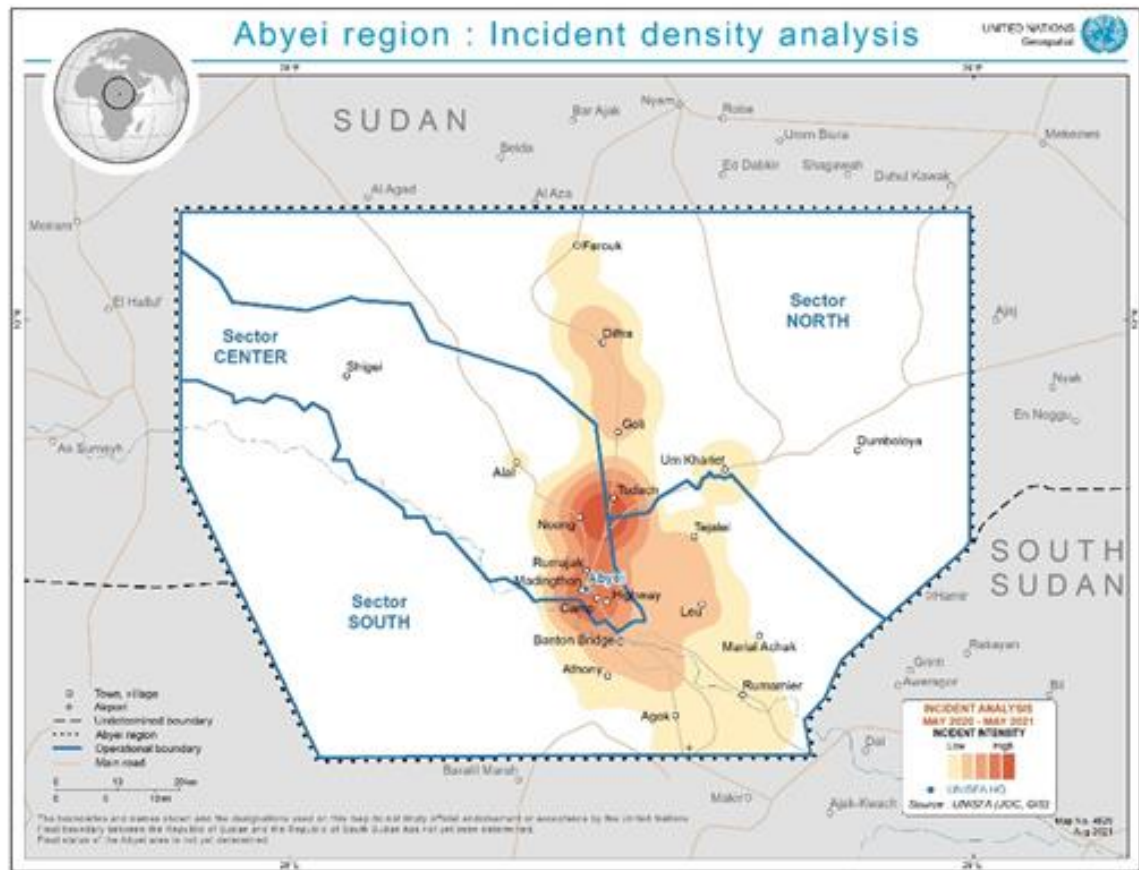
Murder cases have been on the rise since May 2019, escalated in particular by the intercommunal clashes in Kolom on 22 January 2020, the attack in Mabuk on 13 April 2020 and the incident in Dungop on 16 May 2021. Cases of cattle rustling tend to increase during the reverse migration at the start of the rainy season, in line with existing trends, and most cases are along the migration corridors, particularly in the centre and south of the area. As for cases of sexual violence, on the basis of statistics provided by the community protection committees, as well as those reported directly to UNISFA, the incidents of rape and/or attempted rape have increased from 3 to 7, and domestic violence has increased from 72 to 102 in the period between January and June 2021, compared with the same period in 2020. In my regular reports to the Security Council on the situation in Abyei, I have provided details on these and other incidents.

Figure I  
Map of migration corridors and main flash points during the 2020/21 season



It was also revealing that, in terms of geographical context, most incidents took place around two areas, namely areas of intense economic exchange between the communities such as the Amiet common market and areas that the communities perceive as inherently theirs and where they fear encroachment by others. As such, the strategic review found that flash points were located along a north-south axis at the centre of the Abyei area, more specifically, in the Amiet common market and its environs owing to their commercial attraction, and in settlements like Kolom and Dungop, as shown in the map below.

Figure II  
Map of main flash points as of June 2021



Source: United Nations Interim Security Force in Abyei.

### Rule of law challenges

In the absence of rule of law authorities (police, prosecution, courts or prisons) in Abyei, management of law and order is undertaken by the area community protection committees assisted by UNISFA, and justice is administered primarily through traditional mechanisms. Monitoring of traditional mechanisms has indicated violations of the rights of accused persons, particularly of female victims. UNISFA is supporting the traditional justice mechanisms, notably the Joint Community Peace Committee, a community-led peace mechanism that comprises representatives of Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities and performs both legislative and judicial functions aimed at ensuring peaceful coexistence. The Committee also settles grievances regarding land disputes, cattle rustling, migration and other conflict drivers. The Amiet Joint Peace Committee, which is similar to the community protection committees and monitors activities and violations for the Amiet common market area, and the Abyei traditional court perform similar functions. In the absence of functioning and recognized joint law enforcement institutions, UNISFA is called upon to deliver on matters related to police work, that are beyond its current capabilities. In addition, the communities have expressed serious concern about the administration of justice and the lack of accountability for law offenders. The three community-operated detention facilities in Abyei town, Amiet common market and Agok town operate in challenging conditions and with minimal resources.

## **Signs of joint mechanisms**

As detailed in my most recent report to the Security Council on the situation in Abyei ([S/2021/383](#)) of 15 April 2021, there is measured progress on the functioning of the Joint Political and Security Mechanism, which met twice during 2020, in Juba and Khartoum. The Mechanism took several important decisions, including the deployment of joint military observer teams throughout the Abyei area, and the introduction of border-related benchmarks. In February 2020, the Mechanism agreed to explore possibilities to establish a joint investigation team to investigate the intercommunal clashes in Kolom on 19 and 22 January 2020; and review and endorse the memorandum of understanding, originally submitted in 2015, for the handover of suspects of serious crimes from the mission to the relevant Government. The implementation of the decisions will have a positive impact on the UNISFA mandate and will facilitate its reconfiguration in support of the parties. In the meantime, there is no progress on the establishment of the joint Abyei Area Administration, the joint Abyei Council and the Abyei Police Service, agreed upon on 20 June 2011. Instead, the parties have appointed separate chief administrators for the area, effectively covering respective parts of the territory; there is no indication, however, of joint work or coordination between them.

## **Impact of regional developments**

Regional developments have had a significant impact on UNISFA since its establishment, and the current dynamics within the region are critical for its configuration and its future. Since its establishment, UNISFA has been a unique operation, having a single troop-contributing country from a neighbouring country and therefore increased exposure to the trilateral relations between the Sudan, South Sudan and Ethiopia.

When the Security Council called for the strategic review in its resolution [2575 \(2021\)](#) in May 2021, the regional factor of reference consisted of the positive relations between the Sudan and South Sudan. However, the ongoing armed confrontation in Ethiopia, the dispute between the Sudan and Ethiopia over the Fashaqah triangle and the dispute related to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam have added a dimension of uncertainty to the operation, with the Sudan publicly calling for the replacement of the Ethiopian contingent in UNISFA.

## **Proposal for a reconfiguration of the United Nations Interim Security Force in Abyei**

In view of the findings of the strategic review, I would like to propose to the Security Council a reconfiguration of UNISFA in three main areas with a specific time horizon. First, the transformative political developments since 2019 in the Sudan and the political transition in South Sudan, and their strong commitment to solve the outstanding issues through dialogue, have created a realistic opening for joint approaches and a political solution.

Therefore, the role of UNISFA as a deterrent to military confrontation at the national level has changed. The operation should be geared towards fostering the conditions for the final stage of the negotiations on the political settlement, and the role of the United Nations entities would need to be revised accordingly. Second, the trends in the security situation and the nature of threats in Abyei require that UNISFA have a new posture, one that is lighter, more responsive and consolidated around the areas of the security challenges. Third, peacekeeping tools may no longer be enough; the nature of issues in Abyei requires an enhanced focus on peacebuilding with a view

to facilitating a rapprochement between the communities. To this end, a significant effort is required to scale up the development intervention.

In the meantime, the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism component should build on its achievements and continue to support the parties towards addressing issues along their common border. As the parties reach a political agreement, UNISFA would exit gradually while security functions were taken over by national and local mechanisms.

### **Military component**

Considering the recommendations of the study on military capabilities conducted in 2019, and the evolution of the political and operational environment of the mission, UNISFA should be reconfigured in order to improve its capacity to deliver the mandated tasks in a new regional reality. I recommend the following two options for reconfiguration of the operation for the Security Council's consideration:

(a) *Option one: reconfiguration with a slightly reduced ceiling and similar deployment.* Under this option, the recommendation is for the total troop ceiling to be decreased slightly from the current 3,550 to 3,250, including 2,700 for Abyei area and 550 for the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism. While the UNISFA will maintain the current deployment in three sectors, with three infantry units (570 troops each), tanks and artillery heavy units will be repatriated. Force enablers, including the military helicopters unit, the engineering unit, the uncrewed aircraft system unit at the force level and uncrewed aerial vehicles capability within the infantry units, will be enhanced to provide a lighter, more reactive and better-informed force, more able to cope with the terrain during the wet season. The intention is for the military component as proposed to continue to fulfil all required tasks, in accordance with the mission's mandate. The number of troops dedicated to mandate delivery will be similar to the current number, and the changes will not affect the ability of UNISFA to implement its protection of civilians mandate. A detailed assessment of existing enabling capabilities may identify opportunities for more effective and efficient solutions, including the potential replacement of existing force capacities with civilian or contractual capabilities for the provision of logistical support. The advantage of this option is that it does not introduce significant changes to the current force deployment and posture, making it simpler to implement from a logistical and operational standpoint while replacing the entire force;

(b) *Option two: reconfiguration of capabilities and footprint, with reduced ceiling.* Under this option, the recommendation is for the total troop ceiling of UNISFA to be decreased from the current 3,550 to 2,900, including 2,350 within the Abyei area and 550 as part of the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism. In this option, a different structure for the mission is proposed, one that has a smaller footprint while retaining enhanced capabilities. The military component will have no heavy tanks or artillery units, nor a multi-role logistic unit. It will also consist of one less infantry battalion. UNISFA will include two infantry battalions (750 troops each) instead of the current three, as well as upgraded enabling units, particularly the air mobility and engineering capabilities. The deployment of the uncrewed aircraft system unit and uncrewed aerial vehicles capability within the infantry units will provide UNISFA with the adequate tools for gathering information, which are a pre-requisite for an efficient operational concept based on mobility and intelligence-led responsiveness. The number of troops dedicated to mandate delivery will be similar to the existing number, but with fewer troops for support functions, and the enabling units will provide for a more deployable and supported structure to fulfil the mandated tasks, including its protection of civilians mandate. This option will help to facilitate easier command and control of the operation, but will require higher-level coordination. The change of footprint and the focus on incident areas



will result in better coverage of and stronger linkages with the civilian component and the United Nations country team. While this option provides for a smaller number of troops overall, it will still provide a similar number of troops to conduct the protection of civilians mandate when required and will not affect the capability of the Force to rapidly deploy troops throughout the entire Abyei region. For this reason, the military helicopters unit will be split between the areas of operation of the two main infantry units. The advantage of this option is that it serves to set the initial conditions for the mission's exit while providing encouragement for the two countries to improve their joint or coordinated engagements for the security and well-being of the Abyei local communities.

### **Common aspects of both options**

Under both options, consideration is given to the replacement of the current contingents, in the light of the political dynamics mentioned earlier in the present letter, with a United Nations multinational force with enhanced enabling units and a revised concept of operations, necessitating a clear articulation of statement of unit requirements and contingent-owned equipment requirements, supplemented by additional civilian capacity, as necessary. A more mobile, responsive and agile, United Nations multinational force is also dependent on enhanced command and control functions, necessitating an increased communications capability within and between different force units and locations.

It will be necessary to reduce the headquarters of the Force in a proportionate way. It is proposed that the helicopters capability be increased from two to four military helicopters to ensure high mobility during operations. In the light of the reduction of the mission's footprint, it is recommended that its situational awareness capabilities be enhanced. It is proposed that a basic uncrewed aircraft system unit of approximately 100 troops be included to provide information relevant for the self-protection of the Force and enhance its protection of civilians capabilities. The intelligence collection cell at the headquarters of the Force will need to be adjusted accordingly.

### **Operational implications**

The orderly deployment of a United Nations multinational force requires careful planning and sequencing, and the continued cooperation and involvement of the host countries and the troop-contributing countries. The logistical and operational constraints imposed by factors unique to UNISFA, such as the wet season, the limited and lengthy supply routes, existing airlift capacity and air access authorizations, will have an impact on the timelines for the departure of the uniformed personnel as well as their equipment. It is estimated that the replacement of personnel could commence in October 2021 and could take between 100 days and six months. In addition, it is estimated to take between 13 and 24 weeks to deploy replacement units once selected troop-contributing countries have confirmed their readiness and the approved contingent-owned equipment is ready for deployment. Full deployment of the replacement force's equipment within one dry cycle will be particularly challenging, particularly given the need to maintain the continuity of operations throughout the transition. For certain critical enabling functions, such as medical and engineering, which must continue during the entire replacement process, arrangements will need to be made to ensure continuity of basic capacities throughout. In addition, the quarantine requirements arising from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic may also have an impact on repatriation and deployment timelines.

### **Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism**

In both options, it is proposed that the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism be retained at the same level, with its Force Protection Unit slightly decreased from the current strength of 584 to 550 troops. The Mechanism remains at initial operating capability with two out of four sectors open, with two team sites each. It is also proposed that its uncrewed aerial vehicle capacity be increased to provide information collection at the basic unit level and to deliver efficient force protection for the unit and the military observers.

### **Police component**

The disagreement of the parties over the numbers and purpose of the Council-mandated international police capacity has resulted in no progress on the issue. To date, there has been no increase of the police component since Security Council resolution [2469 \(2019\)](#). No formed police units have been granted entry out of the mandated three and the number of individual police officers remains at 48 instead of the mandated 148, with 5 headquarters staff members instead of 12.

### **Civilian component**

Increasing the mission's civilian component capacities would contribute to closing the gap between the Abyei communities and enhancing the protection of women against gender-based violence. With this in mind, the expansion of the existing community liaison office takes priority, not only for its work at the forefront of peacebuilding activities, but also for scaling up support to community livelihood and resilience efforts in conjunction with other United Nations actors.

In view of the limited rule of law and corrections capacity of UNISFA, I would recommend that the United Nations develop a rule of law support strategy in close consultation with the Governments of the Sudan and South Sudan, and the communities of Abyei. The mission should explore new approaches, in cooperation with Sudanese and South Sudanese authorities, to reach consensus on the investigation and prosecution procedures for serious crimes, particularly those that have the potential to destabilize the area, such as the intercommunal clashes in Kolom in 2020. Finally, effective protection of civilians requires close coordination with the Governments of the Sudan and South Sudan, and the local communities, to identify effective ways to prevent attacks against local communities in the area, and to support mechanisms at the national and local levels. At the mission-level such efforts will require an integrated approach across the thematic components, including civil affairs, gender, human rights and rule of law through capacity-building, technical assistance and monitoring in support of the host authorities.

As the parties have agreed to an engagement framework for the political settlement of Abyei and are in the process of finalizing their respective mechanisms, the international community should take on a support function.

In line with the principles of my management reform, and streamlined approaches to the provision of operational support, the proposed mission reconfiguration offers an opportunity to consider alternate arrangements for the provision of certain capacities, such as medical, logistics, engineering, and air and ground support, which could be provided by United Nations commercial contractors or a mix of military and civilian capacities. A cost/benefit analysis needs to be completed as soon as possible to this end. In addition, the enhancement of the existing level 2 medical capability is recommended in order to meet the Organization's standard medical evacuation requirements as well as additional airframe capacity

which, with the flexibility to transport both personnel and cargo, would serve as a genuine multiplier for the operating capacity of UNISFA.

Recommendations relating to the civilian components will require revisions to the existing civilian staffing structure, adequate programmatic funding and adjustments to the mission support staffing and operational resource requirements.

### **Scaling up support for livelihood activities and resilience efforts**

To deconflict tensions at the community level and to lay the ground for a smooth implementation of a future political agreement on Abyei, the strategic review team foresees the need for scaling up humanitarian assistance and support to livelihoods and resilience at the community level and a more prominent role for the United Nations country teams of Sudan and South Sudan. The proposed approach consists of joint work by the United Nations country teams in line with sustainable development and the needs of the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya, on peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and supported through programmatic funding from UNISFA.

The local communities have similar needs but different and high expectations of UNISFA and the United Nations country teams. Humanitarian and recovery needs in Abyei persist as a result of very limited basic services and infrastructures. The situation is further exacerbated by extreme poverty, high prevalence of malnutrition and an adverse economic landscape. The agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations system provide critical services that would otherwise not be available to the population in Abyei. There is, however, a perception among the communities that employment opportunities are not being evenly shared. In addition, there is reported opposition to the work of the agencies, funds and programmes in support of the Misseriya community in the northern part of Abyei area on activities beyond humanitarian assistance.

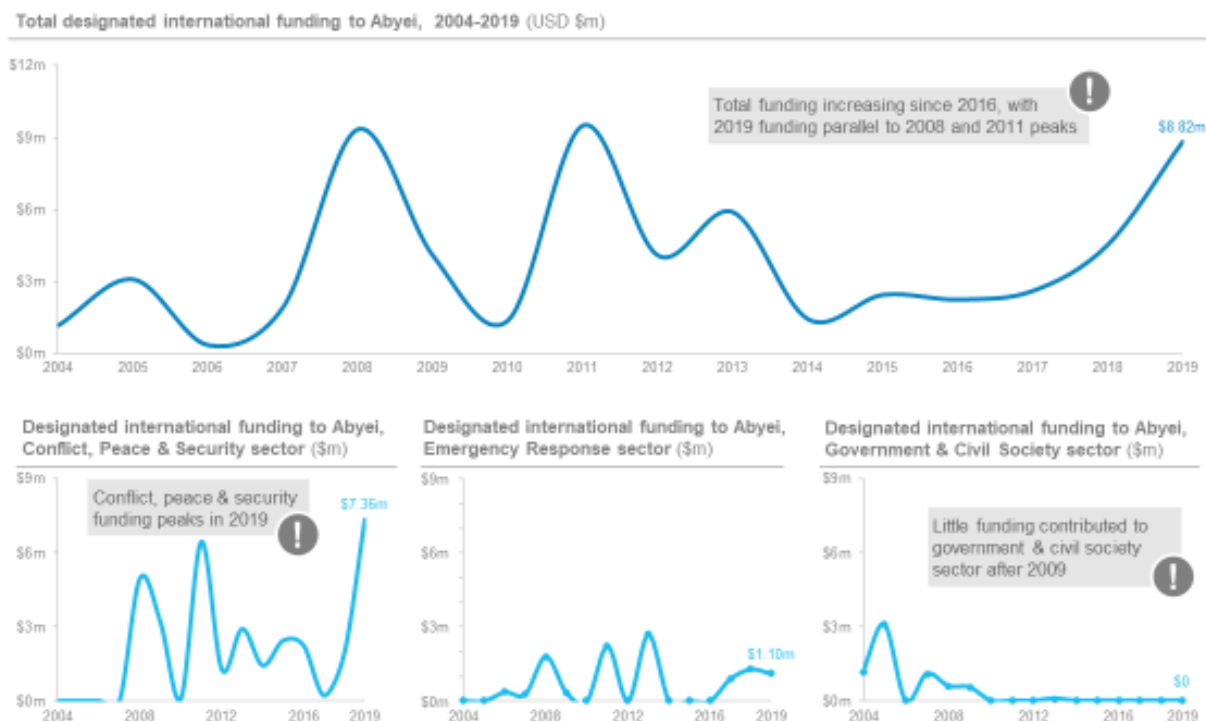
The agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations system face major challenges in the area, including a limited presence with most operations focused on projects with a limited scope, logistical challenges, security concerns and sensitivities to cover the entire area. There are gaps in programme interventions in almost all sectors or clusters, particularly in rule of law and protection areas. Given the different viewpoints of the stakeholders, there is a need to have a strategy and to have clarity on providing principled and needs-based humanitarian and recovery assistance throughout the area in conflict-sensitive ways and to address political sensitivities and perceived bias around service delivery.

Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development for the period from 2004 to 2019 illustrate the clear need for dedicated funding to Abyei in support of community services and livelihood activities. Out of a total of \$62.9 million in international funding designated for Abyei during that period, 55 per cent of the funds were dedicated to the conflict, peace and security sector; 17 per cent to the emergency response sector; and 10 per cent to the government and civil society sector (see figure III).

Figure III  
**Total designated international funding to Abyei from 2004 to 2019, by sector and year**



**Total designated international funding in 2019 parallels 2008 and 2011 peaks; Conflict, Peace & Security funding reaches highest point in 2019**



<sup>1</sup> Funding projects are exclusive to those including "Abyei" in the title, and are not exhaustive of all international funding to Abyei  
 Source: OECD CRS Indicators

**The way forward**

I recommend that, through the joint strategic direction and guidance of the Resident Coordinators in the Sudan and South Sudan, a dedicated programme be established to promote the areas of shared interest for the Ngok Dinka and the Misseriya, built on joint priorities and supported through programmatic funding from UNISFA. The framework of engagement may follow the model of the State liaison functions, successfully tested in Darfur and the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (2018–2020), in which a peacekeeping mission shared with the United Nations country team the benefits of joint work, mobility and security in a non-integrated mission setting.

I intend to request that the two United Nations country teams develop, in consultation with the host authorities, a proposal that is needs-based and conflict-sensitive, in line with the following principles:

- (a) The Resident Coordinators in the Sudan and South Sudan jointly govern the programme through appropriate mechanisms to ensure strategic guidance, implementation, monitoring and accountability;

(b) The programme should provide equitable programmatic support to women, children and vulnerable people in the whole area of Abyei;

(c) All agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations system and their partners should participate in this approach and provide unhindered access to the people in need;

(d) The use of existing mechanisms, including the communities liaison office and community protection committees, as vehicles to implement the programme;

(e) The scope of the programme could include immediate service delivery and support to key areas of transhumance, border management and local protection mechanisms for women, children and vulnerable groups. The proposal should be completed by March 2022.

### **Defining an exit strategy**

In response to the Security Council's request in its resolution [2575 \(2021\)](#) for an exit strategy for UNISFA that is not limited by the 2011 agreements, the review team was not able to propose a clear exit strategy stage but identified several emerging elements that could contribute to the formulation of such a strategy in the future. I consider that the political transformation in the Sudan and the strong commitment between the Governments of the Sudan and South Sudan to resolve their outstanding issues constitute the basis for defining a viable exit for the mission. This is in line with the Declaration of Shared Commitments on United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, namely the primacy of politics in the resolution of conflict. I, therefore, recommend that a time horizon be set for the successful departure of UNISFA.

While the parties are in the process of reaching a decision on the political settlement, several important building blocks are already taking shape. The appointment of the high-level committee in South Sudan, and the expected formation of a similar committee by the Sudan to engage on the Abyei matter, will establish the necessary framework for the political negotiations. Furthermore, the decision of the Joint Political and Security Mechanism to deploy joint military observer teams throughout the Abyei area is a welcome development. Its implementation will lay the ground for the establishment of joint security forces for deployment in Abyei, to take up the security functions currently performed by UNISFA. The modus operandi of the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism, whereby the parties play a determining role through their national monitors, could be replicated as a start-up model for the joint military observer teams and the joint security force. A similar approach could also be explored for the establishment of the joint police service.

### **Political process led by the parties**

The decisive building block for the exit strategy is a political settlement concerning the Abyei area, where the leading role of the Sudan and South Sudan is crucial. The international community stands ready to support the parties as they prepare for this step. The role of the African Union remains critical in the discussions and in facilitating the process, building on the contribution to date of the African Union High-level Implementation Panel. I am encouraged by the positive dynamics between the Sudan and South Sudan and call on the parties to find a durable solution for the status of Abyei.

Finally, as part of defining a strategic vision for the operation, I recommend establishing, in close coordination with the Sudan and South Sudan, a set of benchmarks – including specific requirements for the inclusion of women – built around the joint mechanisms that the parties put in place and steps they need to undertake towards the settlement of the Abyei issue. The accomplishment of these benchmarks would constitute milestones for the gradual drawdown of the operation and establish a time horizon for the successful departure of UNISFA, which could start in two to three years.

I would be grateful if you could have the present letter brought to the attention of the members of the Security Council.

*(Signed)* António **Guterres**

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