

The logo for the International Peace Institute (IPI), consisting of the letters 'IPI' in a bold, white, sans-serif font on a dark blue square background.

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# The UN Mission in South Sudan in the Context of Changing Security and Regional Dynamics

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The logo for the Stimson Center, featuring the word 'STIMSON' in a blue, sans-serif font with a stylized globe icon integrated into the letter 'O'.

On May 26, 2026, the International Peace Institute (IPI) and the Stimson Center organized a workshop to discuss the current security situation in South Sudan, evolving regional dynamics, and the recently adopted mandate of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). The event was part of a series of workshops that aim to support the sustained engagement of UN member states in discussions on how to make peace operations more adaptable, nimble, and effective.

This meeting note was prepared jointly by IPI and the Stimson Center. It summarizes the key themes and perspectives raised during the discussion, which was held under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution, and does not necessarily represent the views of all participants.

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## Introduction

On April 30, 2026, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2820, renewing the mandate of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) for an additional year, until April 30, 2027. The resolution was adopted with thirteen votes in favor and two abstentions. This year's renewal was notable for significant changes to UNMISS's mandate, largely driven by the United States in its role as penholder. In particular, previously mandated tasks related to supporting the political process, especially electoral assistance, were substantially scaled back. The renewed mandate also reduced the ceiling for the peacekeeping force. While the mandate continues to prioritize the protection of civilians, references to accountability measures and consideration of environmental impact have been dropped. Furthermore, the approach to early warning has evolved from one grounded in detailed conflict analysis, data collection, and reporting toward a framework centered on mission-wide engagement with affected communities.

The mandate renewal took place amid a deteriorating security environment in South Sudan. The implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) remains fragile due to the detention of prominent opposition figures and the broader spillover effects of the conflict in Sudan.

At the same time, UNMISS continues to face significant operational constraints. Funding reductions stemming from cuts to the UN peacekeeping budget, combined with contingency planning measures linked to the UN's ongoing liquidity crisis, have resulted in a reduced mission footprint and more limited geographic coverage. These constraints have been further exacerbated by restrictions imposed by government authorities, which have inhibited the mission's ability to conduct patrols, engage communities, and maintain robust early-warning and protection mechanisms.

In this context, on May 26, 2026, IPI and the Stimson Center co-hosted a workshop to examine the implications of regional insecurity for South Sudan and the implementation of UNMISS's newly renewed mandate. Focusing on broader regional dynamics, diplomatic efforts to deescalate tensions in South Sudan, and the operational implications of the new mandate, the discussion provided participants with an opportunity to assess recent developments, identify persistent challenges, and reflect on the mission's future priorities.

Participants reaffirmed the continued importance of UNMISS in protecting civilians, monitoring and reporting human rights violations, and supporting

stability in an increasingly volatile environment. While the streamlined mandate may allow the mission to better prioritize its efforts amid increasing pressure on peacekeeping budgets and the broader UN reform agenda, participants noted that resource constraints and any resulting reduction in the mission's footprint could also pose challenges to effective mandate implementation. The discussion underscored that mandate implementation will depend on sustained political commitment from member states and the host state, as well as close cooperation between the UN and regional stakeholders. Participants also emphasized the importance of ensuring that peacekeeping operations remain adaptable and responsive to evolving realities on the ground.

## Conflict Dynamics and Regional Context

Participants expressed concern about the long-term political trajectory of South Sudan, particularly in light of growing uncertainty surrounding the country's leadership transition. Participants noted that the 2018 R-ARCSS is under increasing strain, arguing that key elements of the agreement, including power-sharing arrangements and joint security mechanisms, have been weakened. The arrest and detention of opposition leaders were cited as contributing to political imbalances that further complicate implementation of the peace agreement. The absence of a clear succession plan in the event of a leadership transition has led to political factions within and beyond the presidency positioning themselves for a potential post-transition environment. Competition over political influence, security institutions, and access to state resources is intensifying. Some participants also observed that the government has increasingly relied on militias and armed youth groups to supplement the security forces.

The conflict in Sudan is having significant spillover effects on South Sudan. The war has exacerbated South Sudan's already fragile economic situation, particularly through disruptions to oil production and exports, while simultaneously contributing to a worsening humanitarian crisis. The arrival of over a million refugees and returnees from Sudan, combined with climate-related shocks in parts of

the country, has placed additional pressure on local communities and state institutions. The worsening economic situation was also seen as reducing the government's room for maneuver as the conflict continues.

Participants noted that international responses should support not only national peace processes and dialogue mechanisms but also subnational initiatives that can help respond to the current crisis. They emphasized the importance of sustained engagement at the local level, noting that unresolved local grievances remain significant drivers of conflict and could quickly resurface if not adequately addressed. Continuing support to local peacebuilding initiatives and community engagement was therefore viewed as an important complement to national-level political efforts, even as resource shortages and the closure of field offices limit the mission's capacity to undertake such activities.

## Regional Diplomatic Efforts

Participants underscored the critical role of regional diplomacy, particularly through the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), in preventing further deterioration of the situation in South Sudan. The AU's role as a guarantor of the peace agreement was highlighted as especially important at a time of heightened political tension and uncertainty.

Participants noted that regional efforts have focused on preventing further reversals in the peace process, encouraging dialogue among the parties, and sustaining political engagement. This included several recent AU initiatives aimed at supporting deescalation and political dialogue. The AU Peace and Security Council conducted field visits to South Sudan in January and April 2026 to assess developments on the ground and engage directly with national stakeholders. The AU High-Level Ad Hoc Committee for South Sudan (C5) also visited the country and met on the margins of the AU Summit, where it called for deescalation, emphasized the importance of holding elections by the end of the year, and urged the release of political detainees, including First Vice President Riek Machar. In addition, participants highlighted

the engagement of the newly appointed AU high representative for the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, former Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete, who has consulted with representatives of both the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), including President Salva Kiir, and the SPLM-In Opposition (SPLM-IO). At the same time, participants stressed that regional diplomacy requires sustained international political support and accompaniment to maximize its effectiveness.

Participants also emphasized the importance of coordinated engagement between regional actors and the UN Security Council, highlighting the role of the three African members of the Security Council (A3) in bridging regional perspectives to the council's deliberations on South Sudan. They observed that the A3, reflecting the broader African position, have generally prioritized political dialogue over the use of sanctions, including those imposed by the Security Council.

## Continuity and Changes in UNMISS's Mandate

On April 30, 2026, the Security Council renewed the mandate of UNMISS, maintaining its four core priorities: protecting civilians; creating conditions conducive to the delivery of humanitarian assistance; supporting the implementation of the R-ARCSS and the broader peace process; and monitoring, investigating, and reporting on violations of international humanitarian law and human rights abuses. While the four priority areas were retained, the activities under each priority were narrower, particularly with regard to support to the peace process and implementation of the peace agreement.

### Protection of Civilians

Participants reflected on the evolution of UNMISS's protection mandate, noting that the protection of civilians (POC) became the mission's central priority following the outbreak of the civil war in 2013 and remained so even after the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018. Participants noted that

important lessons could be drawn from the mission's earlier reconfiguration, when operational priorities shifted from political and capacity-building support toward immediate protection interventions in response to attacks on civilians.

A recurring theme in the discussion was whether multidimensional peace operations can effectively pursue a wide range of priorities simultaneously in highly fragile environments. Participants noted that, in the case of South Sudan, there remains a clear expectation among communities and international stakeholders that UNMISS's primary responsibility is the protection of civilians. Some argued that where there is limited political buy-in for the peace process, POC should remain the mission's overriding priority, as reflected in both its mandate and the allocation of resources.<sup>1</sup>

Participants expressed concern that discussions on mandate priorities often overlook the gap between mandates and operational realities. While POC remains central to UNMISS's mandate, the mission's ability to implement this task has been constrained by declining resources and operational limitations. Participants observed that UNMISS has increasingly shifted toward monitoring and reporting functions, with reduced capacity to respond rapidly to emerging threats, intervene during crises, and prevent harm to civilians. In this regard, participants stressed that the effectiveness of a mandate depends not only on its language but also on resources, mobility, and force posture.

The reduction in UNMISS's physical presence across the country was identified as a particular concern. Participants noted that the mission's bases remain one of its most effective tools for protecting civilians in South Sudan. The reduction from twenty-eight to eighteen bases will diminish the mission's ability to protect vulnerable populations and maintain situational awareness in remote areas. One participant referenced a previous mission assessment that concluded that approximately thirty-six bases would be required for the mission to fully implement its mandate. Given that UNMISS is currently operating far below this target, participants emphasized the importance of

<sup>1</sup> In 2009, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1894, noting that POC should be designated as a priority task and that all missions with POC mandates should reflect this in the allocation of resources, but this has not been fully implemented.

maintaining mobility and rapid-response capabilities to mitigate the effects of a smaller footprint.

Participants highlighted concerns that security sector reform has been increasingly deprioritized despite its importance for long-term civilian protection. Strengthening accountable and professional national security institutions was viewed as essential to creating conditions for sustainable protection. Similarly, accountability mechanisms and continued human rights monitoring and reporting remain key elements of the mission's protection strategy, though these activities have also been strained by resource shortages.

The discussion also examined how UNMISS should adapt its deployment posture to evolving protection risks. Participants noted that protection efforts have historically been concentrated around displacement sites, as observed in Malakal. In the current context, the mission has aimed to expand its presence around larger operating bases and redeploy resources to areas facing heightened insecurity, including Tambura, Leer, Renk, and Akobo. Deployments in locations such as Tomping and Wau were also viewed as indispensable to respond effectively to emerging threats.

An important provision in the 2026 UNMISS mandate is the request that the secretary-general undertake an assessment of the mission's military and police capability levels, mobility, command-and-control arrangements, quick-reaction capacity, reserve capabilities, and enablers. With the significant budgetary shortfalls, the assessment will be an opportunity to evaluate and present to the Security Council the mission's posture and an assessment of its efforts to fulfill its mandated tasks based on its current resources.

Looking ahead, some participants suggested that future peace operations may benefit from narrower and more focused mandates, with responsibilities expanded incrementally as benchmarks are achieved and resources permit. Others cautioned that the rapidly evolving situation in South Sudan may require continued flexibility and a broad range of tools to respond effectively to emerging risks, particularly tensions related to a contentious leadership succession and competition among political factions.

At the same time, some participants observed that the reduction in the authorized troop ceiling may not have an immediate operational impact, as current force levels remain below the newly authorized ceiling of 12,500 personnel. Nevertheless, concerns were raised that the broader protection environment is becoming increasingly fragile, not only because of constraints facing UNMISS but also due to financial pressures affecting humanitarian organizations and NGOs that play a critical role in civilian protection.

Participants emphasized the importance of UNMISS working closely with local and international civil society organizations to support initiatives that help inform patrol planning and improve responses to local protection concerns. It is critical for the mission to maintain strong community engagement, particularly in contexts where restrictions on its activities limit its freedom of movement. Direct communication with local populations was viewed as essential for understanding emerging risks, building trust, and strengthening early-warning mechanisms. In this context, participants noted that community-level discussions on elections are already taking place and may provide an opportunity to identify, monitor, and mitigate risks associated with potential electoral tensions or disputes.

## Elections and the Political Transition

The latest mandate no longer includes technical assistance and advice to the South Sudanese transitional government on electoral processes. With delays and increased uncertainty around elections, participants observed that the mission faces a dilemma: withholding support for elections could be perceived as a lack of commitment to South Sudan's transition, while supporting elections that may not be credible, inclusive, or secure risks conferring legitimacy on a flawed process.

Participants noted that both the government in Juba and many regional actors continue to advocate for elections as a key milestone in the transition process. However, concerns were raised regarding the feasibility of conducting credible elections under current conditions. Ongoing

political tensions, insecurity, the detention of opposition leaders, restricted civic space, limited funding, narrow fiscal space, and the absence of essential electoral institutions were all cited as major obstacles. Several participants argued that discussions about political transition and elections cannot be separated from the broader political and security crisis, including the fragility of the peace process and the risk of renewed conflict.

Several participants cautioned against viewing elections as a solution to South Sudan's underlying challenges. Rather, they argued that elections should be seen as one component of a broader political process. Some participants suggested that prioritizing elections before key political and security conditions are met risks "putting the cart before the horse" and could exacerbate instability rather than build the government's legitimacy.

At the same time, some participants suggested that the current momentum around elections could provide an opportunity for the UN, the AU, and international partners to encourage the reforms necessary for a credible political process. In this regard, participants emphasized the importance of continued engagement by regional actors, particularly the AU and IGAD. Regional bodies were viewed as critical for supporting institution-building efforts, advancing constitutional reforms, strengthening electoral laws and bodies, and maintaining political dialogue among stakeholders.

Some participants proposed that future international support should be linked to concrete benchmarks related to implementation of the R-ARCSS. Suggested benchmarks included the release of political detainees and the restoration of political dialogue among the parties; progress on the unification and deployment of unified forces; the deployment of sufficient police personnel to manage electoral security; and the expansion of civic space, including the protection of freedom of expression, political participation, and civil society engagement. Participants noted that international support and electoral assistance could be expanded incrementally as these benchmarks are met.

The discussion also addressed the political role UNMISS could play in the current context. Participants stressed that protection needs remain acute, particularly in conflict-affected areas such as Upper Nile State, where the mission's presence and rapid-response capabilities remain essential. Participants emphasized that the mission's mandate should be understood as part of a broader political strategy rather than as a standalone instrument. They further noted that the continued obstruction of UNMISS's activities by national authorities remains a significant challenge and underscored the need for sustained political support from both regional actors and the UN Security Council.

Participants also highlighted the importance of maintaining community-level political engagement and exploring complementary approaches beyond elite-focused negotiations. Some argued that greater emphasis should be placed on civil society engagement and track II diplomacy, particularly given the limited political dialogue currently taking place among key actors. Community discussions regarding elections were viewed as an important opportunity to identify and mitigate the risk of electoral violence and local conflict.

## Host-State Cooperation and Community Engagement

Participants noted that the closure of some of the mission's bases was carried out under significant time and financial constraints, limiting opportunities for adequate consultation and communication with affected communities. These constraints complicated efforts to manage the transition and mitigate the impact of the mission's reduced footprint.

Participants also highlighted a range of challenges related to host-state cooperation and the implementation of the status of forces agreement (SOFA). Reported obstacles included restrictions on freedom of movement, taxation of mission supplies, limitations on logistical support, misinformation and disinformation campaigns, and impediments to humanitarian access. Some participants noted that differing interpretations of

agreements among government officials at the national and local levels often created inconsistencies in the mission's operating environment. While senior political leaders might express support for UNMISS's activities, implementation on the ground could vary considerably.

Participants observed that, in responding to these challenges, the mission has often had to make difficult operational decisions and prioritize where to focus its efforts despite competing needs. All reported SOFA violations were documented by UNMISS and raised through appropriate channels. In some instances, UNMISS continued to conduct patrols and maintain a presence despite objections from local authorities. Akobo was cited as an example of a location where the mission maintained operations despite resistance to its continued deployment by the government.

Participants emphasized that continued restrictions on mission activities undermine its ability to implement its mandate effectively, particularly with regard to the protection of civilians and support for humanitarian operations. They stressed the importance of consistent political backing from the Security Council, the AU, and other regional actors in addressing SOFA violations and ensuring that UNMISS is able to operate in accordance with its mandate.

## Conclusion

The combined effects of a fragile peace process, heightened political tensions, economic deterioration, the spillover of conflict from Sudan, the emerging Ebola crisis in the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo, and growing humanitarian pressures have created a volatile environment in South Sudan. While regional actors remain actively engaged in efforts to prevent further escalation and sustain political dialogue, progress toward a durable settlement remains uncertain. South Sudan continues to grapple with unresolved questions surrounding the political transition and the lack of implementation of the R-ARCSS, which remains the primary political framework for addressing the conflict and advancing sustainable peace.

Against this backdrop, UNMISS continues to play an indispensable role in protecting civilians, supporting humanitarian access, and monitoring human rights conditions. Yet the recent changes to its footprint and posture appear to be driven more by budgetary constraints than by conditions on the ground. UNMISS faces the challenge of responding to growing protection and stabilization needs with fewer resources, a reduced presence on the ground, and constrained mobility due to government restrictions.

<sup>7</sup> However, the budget for AUSSOM (estimated at between \$166.5 and \$190.2 million) is less than that of most UN peacekeeping operations, including UNSOS (\$499.8 million). UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 8 May 2025 from the Secretary General, Addressed to the President of the Council*, UN Doc. S/2025/295, May 8, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Security Council Report, "Informal Interactive Dialogue on Enhancing Regional Counter-Terrorism Cooperation in West Africa and the Sahel," July 14, 2025.

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