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POLICY BRIEF

Balancing Autonomy and Stability

UNSOM's Transition to a Country Office in Somalia

SEPTEMBER 2024

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This policy brief aims to provide key recommendations for the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), the United Nations (UN), and international partners as they navigate the transition to a post-UNSOM mission, UNTMIS beyond November 2024. It offers insights into how stakeholders can restructure their operations and activities during the transition, to ensure continued support for Somalia's political, security, and development goals during this period.

September 2024

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Introduction

The United Nations has been actively involved in Somalia for over three decades, responding to the complex challenges that erupted after the collapse of the central government in 1991. Since then, the country has faced several challenges, including civil strife, humanitarian crises such as widespread famine and cyclical flooding, and general state fragility. The persistent instability that emerged has allowed for various forms of violence to take root in Somalia. In the 90s, the UN took on a proactive role as the first respondent in a post-Cold War setting. Somalia was the world's second major crisis in that new setting; the UN responded to it in 1992. Their response initially came about due to the dire humanitarian crisis that followed the collapse of the Siad Barre government; chaos had ensued with warring factions battling for control, widespread famine, and large-scale displacements of civilians. In a few years, the role expanded to include peace enforcement and peacekeeping missions to stabilize the country.

As per their mandates, the UN missions are established to stabilize Somalia, support the re-institutionalization of the state, and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid. The first UN mission in Somalia, the United Nations Operation in Somalia I (UNOSOM I), came into being in 1992 when the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), through Resolution 746, decided to deploy UN personnel to respond to the severe humanitarian crisis that had erupted following the civil war and the famine that had ensued. Earlier in the same year, the UNSC imposed an arms embargo on Somalia to stem the increasing conflict. UNOSOM I was short-lived and followed closely by "Operation Restore Hope" - UNITAF and the second iteration of UNOSOM I, UNOSOM II, in 1995. After facing immense challenges and failing to stabilize Somalia, instead facing operational limitations and major credibility issues after reports of grave human rights abuses, UNOSOM II wrapped up and gave way to the United Nations Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS) in 1995. While based in Nairobi, this political office navigated the various Somalia reconciliation processes outside the country. UNPOS provided UN access and involvement in the critical reconciliation processes that led to the stabilization of Somalia until 2013, when UNPOS was upgraded to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), a political mission represented by an SRSG.

UNSOM has been in existence for a little over a decade and has effectively transitioned in mandated tasks from initial foundational support in 2013 to the most recent resolution that introduces transition planning to a country office while tasking the UN to broadly focus on state-building efforts, stabilization in newly recovered areas and integrating climate resilience in addressing Somalia's environmental vulnerabilities. The mandate's evolution highlights the changes on the ground from building governance frameworks to enhancing those frameworks. Most visibly, on UNSOM support to governance and political processes, in 2013, while mandates spoke of creating a federal system with only one Federal Member State officially in existence, in 2023, the mandate emphasized reconciliation and inclusive governance.

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“The transition from the previous indirect electoral system to the planned new system of universal suffrage will require broad and inclusive consultations, and a willingness of all stakeholders to engage in dialogue in order to build political consensus.”

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Ag SRSG to the Security Council on the situation in Somalia, Oct 3, 2024

UNSOM officially moved to Mogadishu in 2013 and established offices in the rapidly forming federal member states. However, UN activities have been affected by the unstable and unpredictable security situation caused by the armed insurgents al-Shabaab and other militant groups. The security environment has led to attacks on UN personnel and installations, the most notable being the attack on the UN compound in Mogadishu in 2013, killing at least 22 people. The ongoing violence and an incomplete political settlement that fuels periodic political instability, particularly around election cycles, has limited the UN's reach and access. These issues continue to undermine progress in Somalia's state-building efforts.



UN Photo/Tobin Jones - Guard at watchtower of UN Compound in Mogadishu, Somalia (file photo, June 2013).

In May 2024, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) formally submitted its request for a transition from UNSOM's special political mission status to a United Nations country team model "following thorough consideration of Somalia's strategic priorities." This move was heralded as an effort towards greater autonomy over governance processes. However, the abruptness of the request raised concerns among stakeholders about Somalia's readiness to manage its affairs independently. The Somali government's request also coincided with Somalia's successful bid for a two-year term on the UN Security Council, representing East Africa and African interests. These developments, alongside the scheduled transition of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) to the African Union Support Office in Somalia (AUSSOM) by the end of 2024, amid rising regional tensions, have brought forth the urgency and complexity of Somalia's transitions and the importance of maintaining stability during this critical time.

In late August 2024, the FGS submitted a proposal to the UN through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, providing the parameters of the post-UNSOM mission.

While the FGS does not specify the mandate, it states that the “transition will involve a phased handover of responsibilities to Somali institutions and the UN Country Team over a two year period, a reduction in UNSOM personnel and budget, and a focus on capacity-building within Somali institutions.”

The FGS stated the document was as a result of extensive talks between the joint technical team of the UN and the FGS. According to reports, consensus has emerged on forming a new mission, to be named the United Nations Transition Mission in Somalia (UNTMIS). The new mission will be established in Nov 2024 after UNSOM's current mandate expires. In addition to its good offices mandate, the mission is also expected to facilitate the gradual transition towards a UN country team by October 2026. The mission's mandate will involve progressively transferring substantive tasks to Somali counterparts or the UN country team.

The transition from a political mission to a country team is, in principle, a much-needed one. Nevertheless, while it may appear that Somalia has overcome its 30-year-old challenges post-state collapse, the new transition mission requires a detailed mandate and clear benchmarks for success. Somalia has grown and shown progress in its resumption of state functions, but the main UN tasks, such as the good offices of the UN and the coordination of international assistance, will necessitate continuous and attentive oversight. This policy brief examines the challenges associated with this transition, evaluates various policy options, and offers recommendations to ensure that Somalia and its international partners can successfully navigate this consequential moment.

Navigating UN Transitions

The UN typically deploys three types of missions with different iterations: UN peacekeeping missions, such as UNOSOM I and II; Special Political Missions, such as UNSOM; and Humanitarian and or Development missions that would eventually form part of a UN Country teams, such as UNDP, WFP, UNHCR, and UNICEF. The transition from UNSOM to a Transition mission and eventually to a country team is not typical. However, due to the contextual complexities in Somalia, the mission may bridge the gap of shifting from peacebuilding to a development-focused country team. Even with a transition mission, several critical issues need consideration to ensure stability and a successful transition from UNSOM to a new reality.

Somalia has been battling militant Islamist groups for over a decade, and this threat remains a top priority for Somali administrations. The Somali security forces, alongside AU forces, remain the primary response to this threat. However, the UN's main effort is to complement the military and security efforts mainly through SSR and capacity building, UN support for political and institutional stabilization, support for stabilization and recovery in liberated areas, and coordination of international and regional actors. The transition activities of ATMIS over the past two years, along with the military operations, have shaped and in some cases limited UN operations in Somalia. The transition from ATMIS to AUSSOM later this year is expected to define this further. Notwithstanding the transition troubles, the geopolitical challenges raised by the MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland have also raised regional tensions significantly. Considering this highly mobile and volatile period, the UN's adaptation and involvement will be crucial and needs serious consideration.

“Timelines vs. Benchmarks”

The debate of time-based versus conditional transitions is not new to Somalia, as it has been regularly discussed during AU mission negotiations. In the case of the UN, set timelines for mission drawdowns have led to unresolved issues post-transition in cases such as Côte d'Ivoire and Haiti. Conversely, Columbia and Nepal showcase how phased transitions with clear benchmarks can set the grounds for stability and long-term success. This conundrum poses a genuine concern in Somalia, considering related concerns such as security and political stability. If the mission timelines take precedence over the situation on the ground, particularly the evolving political and security situation, Somali institutions may be unable to handle full responsibilities. The approach to implementing transitions has historically been a significant factor in the transition's success and the state's future stability. This transition mission mandate should clearly state the substantive tasks to be accomplished when determining the pace of the transition. This cannot afford to be a grey area.

Political will and national ownership have proven to be among the prerequisites for smooth and effective transitions. Somalia has repeatedly declared its determination to oversee and eventually take over full responsibility for the missions in the country.

In FGS letters and proposals, the government has consistently referred to national ownership of the processes that determine Somalia's state-building, recounting the country's aspirations for full sovereignty and autonomy. The Somali determination stems from the concern of Somali stakeholders over the influence of regional and international organizations on internal matters. For the UNTMIS to give way to a country team, the strong political will that Somalia has demonstrated will need to be backed by a more precise understanding and commitment to national ownership. This is required for a structured transition and for Somalia to maintain long-term support for its priorities.

Indeed, UNSOM and its predecessor, UNPOS, were established to support Somalia's peace and reconciliation processes. The internal divisions and fragmentation that followed the state collapse have been the main drivers of armed conflict in the country. Despite the progress on the political front, including the formation of FMSs and several electoral cycles, Somalia remains vulnerable to political instability. Political crises are frequent between the FGS and FMSs, mainly due to power sharing and resource allocation arrangements. If these internal dynamics are not resolved, they could exacerbate tensions, which could fuel internal conflict, resulting in political instability. The transition can exacerbate tensions if the power and resources associated with the mission are not equitably shared or conveyed. There are also concerns related to the transition's management and the possible consolidation of power by the current administration. These fears, if realized, would strain relations between Somali stakeholders and their international partners.

In order to strengthen governance structures, capacity of the local institutions is integral. Somalia's institutions have been incrementally improving for more than a decade now. Despite this, the institutions remain fragile. Experience in other international interventions and UN transitions is the critical nature of the capacities of local institutions. Unfortunately, due to the length of the conflict, UN agencies have taken major responsibilities in critical areas, especially those linked to security, human rights, and governance. In recognition, the FGS proposal calls for enhanced capacities of Somali counterparts to aid the transition. If not carefully considered, the absence of the necessary capacities will pose a significant challenge. This calls for a granular approach to defining the new mandate and ensuring international support is sustained in the transition phase and beyond.

Comparative Analysis of Other UN Transitions

The table below examines the transitions in Nepal, Sierra Leone, and Burundi. These three countries represent a broad range of experiences most relevant to Somalia. Sierra Leone showcases a smooth transition reinforced by strong international backing. Burundi, on the other hand, highlights the dangers of a hasty exit that results in political instability. Nepal, on the other hand, demonstrates a structured and phased transition that emphasizes disarmament and governance.

Country/ Transition	Approach Taken	Key Lessons for Somalia	Risks
Nepal (UNMIN)	Phased approach focusing on Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) and strengthening governance capacities.	A phased approach in Somalia, tied to specific benchmarks, could ensure that Somali security forces (especially the SNA) are adequately trained before UNSOM's withdrawal. Address clan tensions to avoid destabilizing grievances.	Lingering grievances among marginalized groups could destabilize progress.
Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL)	Strong international support throughout the transition, focusing on political stability, governance improvements, elections, and rule of law.	Continued international support will be critical for Somalia post-UNSOM, especially in elections, governance, and human rights protection to prevent backsliding into instability.	Potential backsliding into instability without sustained international support.
Burundi (BNUB)	Premature withdrawal without addressing underlying political grievances, leading to political unrest and violence.	Rushing the transition without ensuring progress in security, political reconciliation, and capacity-building could leave Somalia vulnerable to renewed violence, particularly from Al-Shabaab.	Premature withdrawal may lead to renewed conflict and political unrest.

Proposed Solutions for a Successful Transition

Given the current political and security realities in Somalia and the region, the transition from UNSOM will require careful consideration. This section will list a number of courses of action that can guide Somali policymakers, the UN, and other international partners to facilitate a smooth and successful transition.

Flexible, Benchmark-Based Transition Plan

The transition from UNSOM to a transition team and finally to a country team is currently being proposed with very tight timelines. The timelines are challenging as the country is approaching a similar transition of the AU forces, regional tensions related to the post-ATMIS mission composition, and electoral cycles that have been delayed at the regional level. It will be crucial for the UN and FGS to provide a structure for the transition, particularly around specific governance and security achievements. Arbitrary timelines may come with their risks.

Strengthening the Somali Security Forces

The strengthening of the Somali security forces underpins the country's long-term stability and security. It will also demonstrate the country's ability to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Thus, to ensure that the UN political mission's achievements take root and that there are no security gaps post-UNSOM, continued support towards strengthening the operational capacities of the SSF is crucial. SSR efforts are also necessary if Somalia is to pitch a formidable force against al-Shabaab and other threat groups. This strengthened SSF will help restore public confidence and legitimacy in Somali authorities and, in turn, counter al-Shabaab's influence.

Facilitating Political Stabilization

This course of action is a critical policy action for Somalia's current political environment, which is sometimes highly fragmented. The governance challenges stem from scarce resources, constitutional challenges, and power-sharing modalities. There is a need for open dialogue between the FGS and FMSs to resolve contentious issues as they crop up. Further, there is a need to focus on the decentralization of governance in order to reduce tensions and address local needs and concerns. The ultimate aim of this option is to facilitate fair and inclusive political processes. Somali stakeholders and the UN must also focus on local reconciliation processes.

Capacity Building with Milestone Tracking

This offers a structured but adaptable approach to implementing the transition. The new mission will need to be intentional about the state institutions that would be most impacted by enhanced capacities. If carefully considered and implemented, these capacity-building programs would, in turn, directly impact the success of the transition. This would include reviewing necessary legal frameworks and ensuring a qualified personal and operational environment exists for the transition to succeed.

Strengthening Political Will and Ownership

This approach is essential not only to ensure the successful transition from UNSOM to the eventual country team but also to address the political and security challenges that exist to promote long-term stability. This can be implemented through national dialogue forums at the national and regional levels, not only for the UN transition but also on topical matters that require consensus. Promoting political dialogue on all national matters will ensure transparency and promote accountability and good governance. Continued engagement and consultation would foster the responsibility and readiness to take over full responsibilities.

Sustained International Support

Though the ultimate goal is self-reliance, sustained international support will remain critical in implementing the ongoing transitions from ATMIS and UNSOM. The required international support should be targeted to Somalia's priorities, i.e., security, governance and institutionalization, economic development, humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic support for Somalia's cause. Sustained international support as Somalia navigates its transitions would ensure smooth processes and progress against the benchmarks set out.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The impending transition from a special UN political mission to a transitory mission before a country team is, in essence, a necessary and timely step for Somalia. Although the nation has made considerable strides in addressing the issues of its 30-year post-state collapse, this shift needs a clear mandate and specific criteria to guarantee success. Notwithstanding Somalia's progress in reinstating state operations, essential UN duties, including its good offices tasks and the coordination of international assistance, will require careful stewardship to avoid setbacks. The following recommendations are for the Somali government, the United Nations, and international partners to facilitate a transition that promotes stability and development while addressing the associated risks.

Policy Recommendations for the Somali Government

Somalia is at a critical juncture as it maneuvers various transitions. The Somali government must take proactive steps to ensure that the transition from UNSOM to a transition mission transcends the title and actually strengthens state-building efforts and addresses ongoing security and governance challenges, while preparing the ground from the country team.

- **The Somali government should actively support the development of a transition plan in coordination with the UN, ensuring that the plan is tied to specific benchmarks. This plan must include input from various Somali stakeholders to align local and national priorities.**
- **The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) must improve coordination with the FMS to ensure effective governance and security operations across all regions. Political reconciliation efforts must be prioritized to address grievances, which could undermine the transition process.**
- **The Somali government must continue to strengthen national institutions, especially in the areas of justice, rule of law, and security, to ensure they can function independently post-UNSOM. The government should prioritize capacity-building programs for the Somali security forces at all levels to enhance their ability to manage security threats, particularly from Al-Shabaab.**
- **The Somali government should lead inclusive political dialogue with all relevant stakeholders, including political groups, clans, and civil society. This dialogue is essential to ensuring political will and national ownership of all actors and thus secure their commitment to the success of the transition.**
- **The Somali government must implement accountability mechanisms to monitor the progress of the transition and address any governance issues that may arise. Transparency in how resources are allocated and utilised will build trust among Somali leaders, their citizens and international partners.**

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- **And finally, in order to protect the transition processes, relevant official institutions must promptly and skillfully address and correct any mischaracterizations from adversarial actors that seek to undermine these partnerships. The Somali Government should therefore ensure that international partners receive appropriate safeguards for their support, this will in turn assist in fulfilling their mandates.**

Policy Recommendations for the United Nations (UN)

As UNSOM transitions to UNTMIS, the United Nations must ensure that the process is carefully managed to avoid any disruption to Somalia's progress in security and governance. The UN's focus should be on ensuring long-term sustainability and institutional resilience.

- **The transition should be benchmark-driven, ensuring that there is clear progress against key governance, security, and human rights objectives before the full handover to a UN Country Team. This will prevent the premature withdrawal of critical support.**
- **The UN should continue its efforts to support political reconciliation between the FGS and FMS, and Somali stakeholders. This will involve mediation and advisory support for key governance and electoral processes to maintain political stability.**
- **The UN support to the security forces should include supporting the various Somali National Security Forces (SNSF) building and strengthening programs by lobbying for sustained and concrete support to enhance their ability to manage internal security without external military support.**
- **The UN should ensure that international assistance remains aligned with Somalia's evolving needs. This includes coordinating with international partners to provide financial and technical support for governance, security, and development programs.**

Policy Recommendations for International Partners

International partners, including donors, regional organizations, and financial institutions, will play a key role in supporting Somalia's transition and ensuring that the country remains on a path toward sustainable peace and development.

- **International partners have relying heavily on the UN as the representative of the international partners and in guiding the IC role in Somalia. In preparation for the drawdown, transition and change to a country office, International partners must begin to invest more heavily in presence and representation in Somalia.**
- **In the interim the international partners must ensure the UN remains responsive to fulfilling its mandate while undertaking its transition. This will involve high level support and backing.**
- **The international partners must remain committed to providing long-term support for Somalia's efforts in governance, security, and development. This assistance should be linked to specific benchmarks to promote accountability and ensure that progress is made.**

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- **International partners should continue to provide security assistance, particularly in training and equipping Somali security forces. Support for counterterrorism efforts against Al-Shabaab remains essential to ensuring that Somalia's security forces can operate independently.**
 - **Somalia's progress is closely tied to regional stability. International partners should work with the UN and the AU to swiftly respond to regional security concerns and promote cooperation among neighboring countries.**

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