



# Reforming the AU Mission in Somalia

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**What's new?** The UN mandate for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) will expire on 31 December 2021. Fatigued financial donors want reforms and perhaps cuts, while the AU and troop-contributing states seek reliable funding. Somalia's government relies on the mission but is nonetheless ambivalent about the need to maintain it.

**Why does it matter?** Despite a mixed record, AMISOM is essential in maintaining a measure of stability in Somalia. A hasty withdrawal would embolden Al-Shabaab's Islamist insurgency and could plunge the country into chaos. But donors are increasingly reluctant to bankroll a mission that has made little progress against militants over recent years.

**What should be done?** The UN Security Council should extend AMISOM's mandate by six months. AMISOM's partners should use that time to make a reconfiguration plan that contemplates a five-year horizon; seek funding from the UN, African Union and others to address shortfalls; and encourage reconciliation between Mogadishu and its domestic adversaries.

## I. Overview

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The UN mandate for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) is set to run out on 31 December 2021. AMISOM has operated in Somalia for fourteen years, primarily to protect the federal government in Mogadishu from Al-Shabaab's Islamist insurgency. A sudden withdrawal would almost certainly allow Al-Shabaab to take over much of Somalia. But views diverge among key players about AMISOM's future. Troop-contributing countries and the African Union (AU) seek funds to keep the mission going, but donors as well as Somali authorities feel that its value is waning. Virtually all agree that if it continues, the mission needs major reform. Though the mission has a mixed record, now is not the time to wind it up. The UN Security Council should extend AMISOM's mandate by six months to give donors, troop contributors and the Somali government time to agree on the mission's future reconfiguration and funding.

AMISOM's donors and partners have a stark choice and no good options. In its early years, the AU mission ousted Al-Shabaab from key urban centres, creating space for Somali elites to build institutions and a political system. But counter-insurgency

efforts have run out of steam, with Al-Shabaab gaining ground of late. AMISOM today undertakes fewer offensives and acts more as a holding force as the Somali army, weak and riven by divisions, is unable to hold areas the AU mission recaptures. Somali politics is a big part of the problem, with disputes between Mogadishu and subnational units known as federal member states undercutting efforts to fight Al-Shabaab. In these conditions, it is hardly surprising that donors chafe at extending the mission's mandate as is. Still, AMISOM keeps Al-Shabaab at bay. Pull it out, and militants could overrun the country. Keeping the mission in place is essential, at least for now.

The first challenge is for the Somali government, AU and donors – especially the European Union (EU), which pays AU soldiers' stipends and thus shoulders the bulk of direct mission costs – to agree on the mission's future. The UN Security Council should roll over AMISOM's mandate for six months to buy time for that to happen and, ideally, to get past Somalia's elections, which are delayed but should conclude in early 2022, barring further delays in an already drawn-out electoral calendar. Mogadishu and its partners should then work toward a compromise that envisages a reconfigured AMISOM plan extended for a longer period, perhaps up to five years. That would provide room for the mission to carry Somalia through a full presidential term and the next election cycle, giving its leaders time to enact necessary reforms.

To enable better planning and assuage some of the AU's concerns, Brussels should quickly give the AU a sense of its maximum budget, with the exact contributions then negotiated on the basis of a detailed AU plan. The AU should seek to diversify funding by lobbying other countries including China, Gulf Arab powers and Turkey, none of which have an interest in the mission withdrawing, while also undertaking serious consideration as to what financial support it might be able to provide itself through its Peace Fund. Members of the UN Security Council should also consider how they might be able to fill gaps creatively through increased funding to UN operations in Somalia that support AMISOM.

Several steps could improve future operations. Soliciting new troop contributors from outside Somalia's immediate neighbourhood could bring new energy to the force, help remedy its persistent command-and-control dysfunction and add sorely needed new capabilities to address an evolving Al-Shabaab threat. The mission can also close isolated bases that serve little purpose as a first step toward freeing up troops and moving on from the holding mentality to which the mission has become accustomed.

The biggest challenge, however, lies less on the battlefield and more in Somali politics. Without mending divisions among Somali leaders, donors will be facing the same dilemma they confront today in five years' time. The top priority should be reinvigorated diplomatic efforts to repair the fraught ties between Somalia's federal government and member states, which undercut efforts to build an effective national army. Reconciliation and regular engagement between these spheres of influence is essential to making progress on other tasks, such as finalising the provisional constitution, which will further strengthen the Somali government and its political order more broadly.

More controversially, all partners should consider AMISOM's extension with the understanding that the coming years will need to see a concerted push to engage with Al-Shabaab, or at least with factions amenable to talks, with the aim of convincing insurgents to join a political process. Such reconciliation presents an enormous

challenge: East African governments for now reject talks with Al-Shabaab; nor have militant leaders themselves expressed much interest – they may prefer to simply wait out foreign forces. Still, little suggests the group can be defeated by military means alone.

Notwithstanding the uphill climb ahead, keeping a reconfigured mission in place is the least bad option. Success over the coming years is far from guaranteed. Generating the conditions in Somalia in which AMISOM can safely withdraw requires domestic reforms that thus far have eluded Somali elites. It requires determination, which to date has been in short supply, from those elites to put aside their differences. Most difficult of all, it requires outreach to Al-Shabaab. But the alternative – pull out AMISOM, risk a Taliban-style takeover of Somalia by Islamist militants and spark a major political and humanitarian crisis in an already deeply unstable Horn of Africa – is much worse. If AMISOM’s partners deem the Somali federal project worth preserving, a five-year reconfiguration and transition plan could mesh the realities behind their understandable impatience and the time required to give Somali leaders what will almost certainly be a last shot at making it work.

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## II. Momentum for Change

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### A. *Origin and Evolution*

The AU and UN created AMISOM fourteen years ago to support a fragile transitional government trying to fend off a powerful Islamist challenger in Somalia. In 2006, Ethiopia sent its army across the Somali border to dislodge the Islamic Courts Union, an Islamist association that together with its militia had seized the capital Mogadishu and other parts of south-central Somalia. Threatened by what it perceived as the Islamic Courts’ expansionist agenda, Addis Ababa backed the internationally recognised Transitional Federal Government – which had formed in 2004 and was struggling to assert its authority – and succeeded in installing it in Mogadishu. Ethiopia’s surprise invasion proved deeply unpopular in Somalia, and fuelled the rise of Al-Shabaab, which comprised youth members of the Islamic Courts. To stabilise the new order and provide an exit for Ethiopian troops, the UN and AU decided to form a mission and mandate it to protect the fledgling government. In February 2007, the UN Security Council authorised AMISOM as an 8,000-strong AU-led mission with an initial six-month mandate.<sup>1</sup>

AMISOM has grown and evolved over its fourteen-year history. Uganda and Burundi were the first countries to provide troops for the mission, which soon engaged in direct combat with Al-Shabaab, pushing militants out of Mogadishu and other cities. Notwithstanding high numbers of casualties within AMISOM’s ranks, the number of troop contributors grew.<sup>2</sup> Djibouti joined in 2011, while Sierra Leone, the only country outside East Africa to provide troops, participated between 2013 and 2014. Although Kenya and Ethiopia sent nationally flagged forces into Somalia to increase pressure

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed look at the mission’s origins, see Paul D. Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia* (Oxford, 2018). AMISOM did not grow to its initial authorised size until 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Paul D. Williams, “How Many Fatalities Has the African Union Mission in Somalia Suffered?”, IPI Global Observatory, 10 September 2015.

on Al-Shabaab in 2011, both countries soon placed a portion of those under AMISOM's banner, with Kenya's contingent incorporated in 2012 and Ethiopia's in 2014. The mission's current mandate is to reduce the threat posed by Al-Shabaab, support Somali security forces and protect the political process.<sup>3</sup> Five East African troop contributors deploy about 19,000 soldiers, who together focus on protecting key towns, institutions and supply routes in six sectors in southern and central Somalia.<sup>4</sup>

Donor arrangements supporting AMISOM have always been somewhat complicated. The UN Security Council authorised a logistical support mission to accompany it in 2009, funded by UN assessed contributions.<sup>5</sup> The UN mission was first known as the UN Support Office for AMISOM, but changed its name in 2015 to the UN Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS), as the support it provided expanded. (The UN has a separate political mission in Somalia, UNSOM.) The establishment of the office was the first time the UN provided this type of support to a mission not run by the UN itself, and AMISOM remains the only non-UN operation in the world to enjoy such assistance.<sup>6</sup> The EU committed at the mission's outset to pay the stipends for troops serving in AMISOM, while other donors contribute either bilaterally or through a UN-run AMISOM trust fund.

The mission's operational record is something of a mixed bag. On the positive side of the ledger, the mission ended Al-Shabaab's formal control of Mogadishu and Kismayo, the country's second-largest city, prised swathes of territory out of militants' hands and provided much-needed security for two electoral cycles, with a third presently under way. But Al-Shabaab remains a potent, indeed in some ways resurgent force; there is no sign its defeat is imminent. Moreover, AMISOM's offensive operations against Al-Shabaab have declined in recent years. The mission has engendered resentment among the Somali populace for human rights violations.<sup>7</sup> Because Somalia's neighbours are troop contributors, the mission also provides some cover for them to pursue their own national interests in Somalia, some of which – addressing bilateral security concerns, for example – are more legitimate than others, such as shaping internal political developments.<sup>8</sup>

AMISOM is not the only external security actor in Somalia. Ethiopia deploys troops bilaterally, in addition to those it maintains within AMISOM. Its government supports President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed "Farmajo's" administration. Similarly, Kenya – which, for its part, has strained relations with the Somali incumbent – deploys forces outside the mission's command. These bilateral deployments at times create confusion and place the mission in the awkward position of denying involvement

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<sup>3</sup> For more details, see UN Security Council Resolution 2568, SC/14467, 12 March 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zambia also contribute to a small police contingent.

<sup>5</sup> UN assessed contributions are the funds UN member states provide to the organisation in order to cover expenses like the UN budget and peacekeeping operations. Each member state's share is determined by a complex formula that takes into account factors like gross national income and debt levels.

<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior UN official, November 2021. The use of UN assessed contributions for a mission run by another body, the AU, was controversial in the United States, which took pains to make clear that no one should regard this arrangement as a precedent for future missions. Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, November 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Somali citizens, August 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Paul D. Williams, "Joining AMISOM: Why Six African States Contributed Troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2018), pp. 172-192.

in activities conducted by a troop contributor.<sup>9</sup> Other actors provide support and training to Somali forces, including the U.S., UK, EU and Turkey.

Discussions about AMISOM's future in Somalia have intensified over the past year. Already for several years, donor fatigue and frustration with the lack of progress have spurred debates about transferring responsibility for Somalia's security from AMISOM to the national armed forces. The problem is that those forces for now are far from up to the task of keeping militants at bay. Moreover, divergent interests among AMISOM's many partners render the challenge of developing a strategy for an orderly transfer that much more difficult: the sprawling coalition of players that have a say in AMISOM's future often talks in circles without making progress toward a consensual plan. Still, in 2021, conversations about AMISOM's future have taken on an urgent tone that differs from previous rounds, with momentum building for substantial change.

### B. *Donor Fatigue*

One reason for the sense of urgency is that AMISOM faces an imminent financial crunch.<sup>10</sup> The mission's main donor, the EU, which has provided nearly €2.3 billion to AMISOM since 2007, insists that it will reduce contributions for 2022, although Brussels will not confirm figures until the end of November.<sup>11</sup> Alternative funding sources are limited. The AU has repeatedly called for donors to provide the mission "predictable and sustainable" funding via UN assessed contributions. For now, however, the U.S. and UK reject outright this idea, which unfortunately makes it a non-starter.<sup>12</sup> A previous AU effort to secure money for AMISOM from non-traditional sources like Russia and China largely failed, while the organisation's own financing mechanism, the Peace Fund, was never intended to be used for the mission and even

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<sup>9</sup> For such an example, see a statement from AMISOM head Francisco Madeira denying involvement in the arrest, apparently involving Ethiopian troops, of a regional presidential candidate just before elections in December 2018. Press release, AMISOM, 15 December 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Tallying the costs associated with AMISOM is difficult, but estimates hovered around \$1 billion per year when troop levels were highest. Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, op. cit., p. 2. AMISOM's 2021 operating budget is \$245 million, coming primarily from the EU, and supplemented by donations from the UK, Norway and a UN-run AMISOM trust fund. "Budget Narrative 2021", AMISOM, undated. Logistical support provided by the UN Support Office in Somalia amounted to \$533 million for the 2021-2022 fiscal year. It is funded by UN assessed contributions. "Budget for the United Nations Support Office in Somalia for the period from 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2022", UN General Assembly, A/75/757, 16 February 2021.

<sup>11</sup> The EU provided €180 million in 2021, mainly for troop stipends. Officials estimate that the contribution could drop between 10 to 50 per cent, with the decline in 2022 near the lower end of the spectrum. But EU officials also want to see a plan for AMISOM's future before committing further funding. Crisis Group interviews, EU officials, August-November 2021.

<sup>12</sup> While the U.S. under the Obama administration was intrigued by the idea of using assessed UN contributions to support a share of the costs of AU missions, the U.S. and UK now oppose UN assessed contributions for AMISOM. They have made clear they do not want to spark a wider discussion about UN funding for AU peace operations or set a precedent for using such funds for global counter-terrorism missions. U.S. officials say a "gigantic" exception was granted for the UN Support Office in Somalia, which is funded out of assessed contributions even though it supports an AU mission. Crisis Group interviews, EU, UK and U.S. officials working on AMISOM, July-September 2021.

if it were fully endowed (\$400 million) would not be able to finance AMISOM for more than a few months.<sup>13</sup>

The EU's enthusiasm appears to be dwindling for several reasons, many of them shared by other outside actors. First, some EU member states are increasingly reluctant to bankroll an expensive partnership that lacks a clear termination date (or a plan for setting one) and that many also perceive to be providing declining value for the money. Frustrated EU donors wonder why they are underwriting a mission that perpetuates an expensive status quo.<sup>14</sup> External partners and Somali officials both complain that AMISOM has become "static" and that its troops are "sitting in their barracks", in marked contrast to its active military engagement with Al-Shabaab in earlier years.<sup>15</sup> AMISOM officials admit that they have indeed stopped going on the offensive, but blame a lack of Somali government support and note that local forces lack capacity to keep militants out of areas that AMISOM has cleared. AMISOM has thus primarily become a holding force preventing Al-Shabaab from recapturing such areas.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, EU attention is shifting as a result of its own structural changes, member state interests and conflicts elsewhere in Africa, for example in Ethiopia, the Sahel and Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado region.<sup>17</sup> The EU previously funded AMISOM through its African Peace Facility, which helped finance African-led peace support operations. In 2021, the EU replaced the facility with two successor global funds – one for military and defence operations and one for development aid – that allow Brussels greater flexibility in the type of security assistance it gives but also widen the range of potential beneficiaries.<sup>18</sup> As a result, AMISOM, and also Somalia, face stiff competition for support. In the second half of 2021, the EU slashed funding

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<sup>13</sup> An AU funding drive in 2016-2017 called on non-traditional donors like Russia and China to offer funding, with little success. Crisis Group interviews, EU and AMISOM official, August-September 2021. The AU Peace Fund has raised just over half its \$400 million target. "Insights on the PSC", Amani Africa, 5 October 2021. It is unlikely to use this money for AMISOM, as that would leave little room for other activities. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°286, *The Price of Peace: Securing UN Financing for AU Peace Operations*, 31 January 2020. The AU also feels the money would be better spent on early warning. Crisis Group interview, AU expert, September 2021.

<sup>14</sup> The EU feels its payment of troop stipends also does little to build long-term capacity, as the money goes to individual soldiers rather than toward development of security institutions. Crisis Group interview, EU diplomat, November 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats and Somali officials, July-September 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group interviews, AMISOM officials, August 2021.

<sup>17</sup> The UK's exit from the EU has deprived Somalia of one of its biggest champions in the bloc. Meantime, France in particular has pushed for more attention to the Sahel, where it is deeply involved in stabilisation efforts. The insurgency in Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado region is also drawing attention in European capitals. Crisis Group interviews, French diplomat and EU officials, July-September 2021.

<sup>18</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Report N°297, *How to Spend It: New EU Funding for African Peace and Security*, 14 January 2021.

to AMISOM by 10 per cent, though the UK stepped in to fill the gap.<sup>19</sup> Contributions for 2022 and thereafter are expected to keep dropping.<sup>20</sup>

Thirdly, a persistent criticism that concerns the EU and other donors is that AMISOM's five troop-contributing countries have mixed motives when it comes to plans for phasing out the mission. They benefit financially from payments to their soldiers and thus have little incentive to press for change. Moreover, donors worry that front-line states like Kenya and Ethiopia have bilateral interests in Somalia that at times outweigh their loyalty to the mission. They view Nairobi and Addis Ababa as leveraging their presence in AMISOM to influence Somali politics.<sup>21</sup> For example, Ethiopia's involvement in local politics and its deployment of forces supporting preferred candidates in regional elections has been disruptive.<sup>22</sup> For its part, Kenya allies with Jubaland, a federal member state in the south, in order to establish a buffer zone aimed at preventing Al-Shabaab from encroaching on the Kenyan border, emboldening that administration at Mogadishu's expense.<sup>23</sup> Some see the protracted funding debate as an opening for a wider conversation about AMISOM reform and a way to overcome complacency within the mission.<sup>24</sup>

Competing interests and perspectives mean that key actors remain miles apart, with the EU and other donors seeking operational changes and a path toward wrapping up the mission while troop contributors are more concerned with obtaining reliable funding. A senior AU official told Crisis Group the AU believes that the EU is posturing and that donors will keep funding at present levels because no one wants to see Somalia collapse.<sup>25</sup> Such a view carries a certain logic, given that no European leader wants to see Al-Shabaab overrun Mogadishu – all the less so after the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan – and most see AMISOM as forestalling that eventuality. Moreover, in the past the EU has held out and pushed for reforms, before finally committing money. But the EU's mounting frustrations are now reaching a level where it would be perilous to assume that AMISOM can rely on undiminished support in the near future absent serious changes.

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<sup>19</sup> The EU extended the African Peace Facility to August 2021, leaving AMISOM's budget for the first six months of the year intact. Following the EU's 10 per cent cut, the UK earmarked £25 million for AMISOM troop stipends for the fiscal year ending 31 March 2022. These measures were aimed at limiting disruptions during elections. Crisis Group interviews, UK and EU diplomats, August–September 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Under the new facilities, the EU will cap contributions dedicated to helping resolve any particular conflict and it is unclear whether the UK contribution that addressed the mission's 2021 shortfall was a one-off. EU support in 2023 is certain to drop more significantly. Crisis Group interview, EU official, October 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Buttressing this argument is that Kenya and Ethiopia each entered Somalia unilaterally and only later re-hatted soldiers as part of AMISOM, while keeping other troops in the country but outside the mission.

<sup>22</sup> Rashid Abdi, "Somalia's South West State: A New President Installed, a Crisis Inflamed", Crisis Group Commentary, 25 December 2018. Ethiopia is frequently accused of rotating its troops in Somalia between AMISOM and its bilateral contingent, depending on the operation. Crisis Group interview, UN official, August 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Tensions have increased between Jubaland and the federal government in recent years. Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°158, *Ending the Dangerous Standoff in Southern Somalia*, 14 July 2020. Kenya's AMISOM contingent is based in Jubaland.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, September 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, AU official, August 2021.

### C. *Somalia's Ambivalence*

Relations between the administration of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed “Farmajo” and AMISOM have been rocky, at times reflecting wider animosity between the federal government and the AU. Holding the reins of power since 2017, Farmajo’s government has repeatedly expressed support for AMISOM’s withdrawal.<sup>26</sup> In 2018, it released the Somali Transition Plan, which called for a phased handover of the mission’s security responsibilities to Somali armed forces by the end of 2021. An updated version released in early 2021 extended this window to the end of 2023. The government’s antipathy for AMISOM is likely driven by two factors. First, Farmajo and his allies appear to believe that funding for the mission should instead be channelled toward Somalia’s security sector.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, as tensions with Kenya worsened in recent years, Mogadishu increasingly has considered an AMISOM withdrawal as a way to curb Nairobi’s influence in Somali politics.<sup>28</sup>

The Somali government’s push for AMISOM’s replacement, however, appears not to take into account the reality on the ground. An AMISOM official explained to Crisis Group that the Somali army is unable or unwilling to provide the necessary troops to secure the locales the mission has regained from Al-Shabaab, a view that is widely shared by foreign diplomats.<sup>29</sup>

Against this backdrop, relations between the mission and its host government are strained. AMISOM complains that Mogadishu uses its limited number of soldiers to settle disputes with member states or other political rivals rather than fighting Al-Shabaab.<sup>30</sup> Cooperation between the Somali army and AMISOM has suffered, with little love lost between the forces’ respective commanders.<sup>31</sup> Senior army officers contend that AMISOM is not sufficiently supporting the army’s own anti-Al-Shabaab operations, citing a mid-2021 offensive in Middle Shabelle that it carried out independently. (For its part, AMISOM said it was given inadequate time to prepare.<sup>32</sup>)

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<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Somali government and AMISOM officials, and diplomats, 2019-2021.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Somali government official and EU diplomat, August 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Under Farmajo, Somalia has drawn closer to Ethiopia and Eritrea at the expense of Kenya and Djibouti. The latter has remained part of AMISOM, however, which puts Mogadishu in an awkward position. The federal government earlier in its tenure floated the idea of replacing AMISOM with a joint Ethiopian-Eritrean force. Once the Tigray war broke out in late 2020, however, this option essentially fell off the table. Crisis Group interviews, AMISOM, AU, EU and UN officials and former Ethiopian diplomat, August-September 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Some contend that the federal government relies too much on AMISOM to serve as a buffer against Al-Shabaab, reducing the impetus to take its own security more seriously. Crisis Group interviews, Western officials and former Somali military commander, September-October 2021.

<sup>30</sup> In 2020, Mogadishu sent troops to Jubaland to battle over the Gedo region, all the while arguing that it did not have enough soldiers to fight Al-Shabaab. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Ending the Dangerous Standoff in Southern Somalia*, op. cit. An AMISOM official expressed doubt as to whether the troops the federal government claims to have trained in recent years actually exist. Crisis Group interview, September 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Mogadishu-based Western diplomat and AMISOM technical adviser, August 2021.

<sup>32</sup> AMISOM may also have been wary of getting involved as the offensive appeared to have political undertones. The operation in Middle Shabelle quickly took shape after clashes in Mogadishu in April, and involved some of the forces who had intervened in opposition to Farmajo then (see next footnote). Many observers saw the operation as a means of keeping those opposing forces occupied, rather than a genuine effort to weaken Al-Shabaab. Crisis Group interviews, AMISOM, former So-



Relations between Mogadishu and the AU soured further in April 2021, amid quarrels in Somalia over delayed elections that Farmajo wished to put off further.<sup>33</sup> The AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) condemned Farmajo's attempt to extend his administration's term by two years in April. Mogadishu subsequently rebuffed an AU envoy authorised by the PSC to find a compromise among Somali political actors on a path toward elections.<sup>34</sup> It did not help that the standoff took place when talks about AMISOM's future were getting serious, hindering cooperation both between the AU and the federal government and between AMISOM and the national army. Ties hit rock bottom in May, when an AU independent assessment team proposed that AMISOM be replaced by a hybrid AU-UN multidimensional stabilisation mission starting in January 2022 – a recommendation that flew in the face of Mogadishu's desire for a direct handover of security responsibility to its forces.

Both sides have attempted to patch up relations since, but tensions remain. After an AU delegation visited Somalia in August, Mogadishu agreed to cooperate in efforts to chart a way forward, including with a new joint Concept of Operations (CONOPS), due by the end of October but still delayed at the time of writing.<sup>35</sup> The CONOPS is expected to outline how the mission will achieve its mandate, laying the groundwork for more detailed operational plans. AMISOM officials attribute the change in tone partly to Somali officials facing up to the reality that they are not ready for AMISOM's departure and that they have no viable alternatives.<sup>36</sup>

Still, the AU and Mogadishu clearly do not see eye to eye about the mission's future.<sup>37</sup> The PSC endorsed the proposal for a hybrid multidimensional mission on 7 October, while the federal government said it "strongly disapproved" of the idea days later.<sup>38</sup> The federal government prefers a quick, direct transfer of responsibility to the army to an entirely new operation that is likely to prolong the process. Illustrating continuing tensions, on 4 November, Mogadishu declared AMISOM's deputy head persona non grata and ordered him to leave the country, saying his activities were incompatible both with AMISOM's mandate and Somalia's security strategy.<sup>39</sup>

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mali defence and UN officials, August 2021. None of the operation's gains were sustained, as months later all the areas the army cleared had fallen out of its control. Crisis Group interview, UN official, November 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Farmajo's constitutional four-year term expired on 8 February 2021, without an agreement between the federal government and other political stakeholders on the conduct of elections. With no agreement in place, on 12 April Somalia's Lower House of parliament voted to extend the government's term by two years. Violence ensued in Mogadishu on 24-25 April, as segments of the Somali security sector that opposed the extension flooded the city and clashed with government forces under Farmajo's command. As domestic and international pressure built, Farmajo backed down. On 1 May, the Lower House of parliament overturned the extension. Omar Mahmood, "Why Somalia's Electoral Crisis Has Tipped into Violence", Crisis Group Commentary, 27 April 2021.

<sup>34</sup> The Farmajo administration saw an AU envoy as emboldening the opposition. Consultations over AMISOM were roiled to the point that a high-ranking AU official considered pulling out the mission entirely. Crisis Group interview, AU official, September 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior AMISOM and AU officials, August-September 2021.

<sup>36</sup> The change in tone also came just after the Taliban's capture of Kabul, which shocked the federal government and may also have shifted its calculus. Crisis Group interview, AU official, September 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interviews, AMISOM official and adviser, August and October 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Press statement, Somalia Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 21 October 2021.

<sup>39</sup> MFA/FRS/DPS/7497/21, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 4 November 2021.

It is unclear how joint tasks like the CONOPS can be completed if both sides fundamentally disagree about the shape AMISOM could take post-2021.<sup>40</sup>

AMISOM also has an image problem among the Somali populace.<sup>41</sup> Somalis believe the mission has caused numerous civilian deaths and resent what they perceive as its lack of accountability.<sup>42</sup> AMISOM established a Civilian Casualty Tracking, Analysis and Response Cell in 2012 to monitor incidents and recommend compensation payments to relatives of people who died in the course of AMISOM operations. Some troop-contributing countries have undertaken limited measures to prosecute AMISOM soldiers for wrongdoing, while AMISOM can convene a special board of inquiry to investigate civilian deaths. None of these mechanisms have typically proven especially robust. Civilian deaths continue to occur, as illustrated by the mid-August killing of seven Golweyn residents by Ugandan troops.<sup>43</sup> Such incidents feed local perceptions that AMISOM is doing more to harm civilians than to protect them from Al-Shabaab.

#### D. *A Continued Need*

But however much it frustrates – for different reasons – donors and the Somali government, AMISOM is critical to preventing further instability. Even Somali officials who complain about AMISOM acknowledge that the mission's withdrawal in the near term would be disastrous, because Somalia's armed forces are not yet a match for Al-Shabaab.<sup>44</sup> Officials in neighbouring countries use stronger terms. "Those calling for AMISOM's exit are calling for the Talibanisation of Somalia", says one Kenyan official.<sup>45</sup>

Al-Shabaab has proven agile and resilient. While AMISOM managed to rid cities of militants in its first few years of deployment, the insurgents are far from defeated and still dominate most rural parts of south-central Somalia. In some places, the group provides basic services, notably quick and reliable, if often brutal, dispute resolution. Al-Shabaab has significant intelligence and force projection capabilities, which in recent years have allowed it to gradually reinfiltre urban centres outside its control, including Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab uses this reach to run extortion rackets and collect illicit taxes, generating healthy financial reserves.<sup>46</sup> The areas that AMISOM

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<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interviews, AU official, regional diplomat posted to the AU, October 2021.

<sup>41</sup> AU and AMISOM officials admit this problem and, to signal a new era, support a name change for any post-2021 mission. Crisis Group interviews, AU and AMISOM official, September 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Mogadishu, August 2021.

<sup>43</sup> "Uganda's troops who killed civilians arrested in Somalia – Museveni," *Garowe Online*, 22 August 2021. On 10 August 2021, seven civilians were killed by (it was later revealed) Ugandan AMISOM troops in Golweyn, Lower Shabelle. At first, AMISOM claimed the victims were Al-Shabaab members, but Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni acknowledged they were civilians. AMISOM then announced an investigation, and a court martial in November found the accused guilty, handing down the strictest sentences in AMISOM's history. The court martial sentenced two soldiers to death, while three others received 39-year prison terms. Press release, AMISOM, 13 November 2021. Expressing his anger just after the incident, an elder from Lower Shabelle said: "I hate, hate, hate AMISOM. They kill us in retaliation and claim we are Al-Shabaab. The only time we have sympathy for Al-Shabaab is when we see AMISOM". Crisis Group interview, August 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Somali defence and other government officials, August 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, Kenyan official, October 2021.

<sup>46</sup> "A Losing Game: Countering Al-Shabaab's Financial System," Hiraal Institute, October 2020.

or the army has recaptured are thus often disconnected, isolated outposts in a sea of Al-Shabaab influence.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, Somalia's national army for now cannot hope to beat the insurgency by itself. It lacks troops and funds as well as proper training and equipment. Reform efforts are undercut by disputes between Mogadishu and the federal member states. Unless political or military dynamics change dramatically, reliance on foreign troops will remain the only realistic option for containing Al-Shabaab.

### **III. Divergent Views**

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Despite broad dissatisfaction with the status quo, Somalia, the UN and the AU lack a common vision as to how the mission should be reformed.

#### *A. Somalia's Transition Plan*

As mentioned above, Somalia's government wishes to wind down AMISOM and step into its shoes. To this end, it has outlined a phased transfer of security responsibility from AMISOM troops to national forces in its Somali Transition Plan, a document first released in 2018 and updated in 2021. Under the proposed plan, the handover would conclude by the end of 2023, and the government would expect AMISOM to align its operational strategy with the Plan in the interim. The document has heavily influenced international partners like the U.S. and UK, which view it as providing guiding principles for future security assistance to Somalia, given that a workable way forward will need Mogadishu's endorsement.<sup>48</sup>

Several problems surround the Plan, however. It lays out broad contours but lacks operational detail.<sup>49</sup> It is based on the so-called clear-hold-build concept, with Somali forces assuming greater responsibility and AMISOM forces less over time. Not only does this approach seem disconnected from the reality of Somali forces' current capability, but it is also one the U.S. has applied in counter-insurgency missions elsewhere with mixed results.<sup>50</sup>

Nor does the document, as revised in 2021, represent a consensus Somali view. In early 2018, Somalia's federal member states endorsed the original transition plan sent to the AU PSC, while an array of other partners signed on at a conference in Brussels later that year. The updated 2021 document lacks the same broad ownership, however. Amid rising political competition, the federal government did little to

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<sup>47</sup> Part of Al-Shabaab's strategy is to avoid direct engagement with AMISOM. When AMISOM or the army withdraws, Al-Shabaab often moves in immediately. The group also maintains blockades on government-held areas, such as in parts of the South West federal member state.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats and AU official, July-September 2021.

<sup>49</sup> "The plan has become the holy bible for a quick fix of the Somali national army". Crisis Group interview, former Somali defence official, August 2021.

<sup>50</sup> The U.S. relied on this sequential counter-insurgency theory in Afghanistan and Iraq. It holds that counter-insurgents should clear contested areas of enemy control, hold them to stop enemy incursion and then afford space for establishing government institutions. One AU official questioned why this strategy would work in Somalia if it was not fully successful elsewhere. Crisis Group interview, AU official, September 2021.

consult member states about revisions, which means they have not agreed to the changes.<sup>51</sup> Some Somali security officials complain that they were not sufficiently consulted, either, despite being responsible for carrying out the Plan.<sup>52</sup> The Plan's timelines also need further revision, as progress has fallen off due to the prolonged electoral cycle.<sup>53</sup>

Troop numbers and training are another concern for transition planners. The national army is struggling to generate troops, complicating government efforts to build security capacity and assert control over territory seized from Al-Shabaab.<sup>54</sup> Partners involved in security planning often overlook the politics behind the army's weakness.<sup>55</sup> Its personnel shortage partly stems from tensions between the federal government and various member states, which under previous agreements were expected to contribute troops to the national army.<sup>56</sup> Absent some form of reconciliation, member states are reluctant to place their troops under army command. Mogadishu has not supplied any alternative plans for bolstering recruitment.<sup>57</sup> Nor is it clear that the soldiers who are enlisted have the skills they need. External partners, including Turkey and the U.S., train troops, but primarily for offensive operations rather than holding territory.

Finally, Somalia is coming up on elections, and there is no guarantee that a future administration in Mogadishu will embrace the Somali Transition Plan.<sup>58</sup> Somali officials stress that most politicians are united on core security issues. The U.S. and UK also hope that the Plan's overall trajectory will remain the same, even if details may change.<sup>59</sup> An AMISOM partner told Crisis Group that waiting for a new government is not good policy because it wastes time, and consistent with that view, perspective partners remain engaged in technical discussions with Mogadishu.<sup>60</sup> It is conceivable, nonetheless, that a new administration will want to put its own stamp on security arrangements, and it could be counterproductive to plan far-reaching changes that a new government, whether formed by a re-elected Farmajo or one of his opponents, might not be willing to stomach. If external partners present a new administration

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<sup>51</sup> For this reason, the AU PSC has not endorsed the 2021 document, to Mogadishu's irritation. Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat based in Addis Ababa, September 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interviews, current and former Somali security officials, August 2021.

<sup>53</sup> A progress report on Somali Transition Plan activities between January and June concluded that "the electoral impasse has threatened the gains made so far". "The Somali Transition Plan Progress Report", Somali Office of National Security, June 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, current and former Somali defence officials and AMISOM officials, August-September 2021. The revised Plan notes that force generation is a key priority. "Revised Somali Transition Plan", Office of National Security, February 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interview, former Somali defence official, August 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior AU officials, September 2021. In the 2017 National Security Architecture, an agreement between the government and member states, the parties outlined a plan for integrating the federal and regional army and police. The Farmajo administration endorsed the document, but as its relations with member states broke down, it shifted its focus to developing national forces on its own.

<sup>57</sup> A force generation conference originally planned for January 2021 has not been held.

<sup>58</sup> Elections are well behind schedule, and it remains uncertain when they will be concluded. Early 2022 is a best-case scenario at the time of writing.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, August-September 2021. One Somali official noted the Plan is "a living document". Crisis Group interview, September 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, July 2021.

with a *fait accompli*, Somali officials might not have a sense of ownership, which might in turn make them resistant to carrying out the new scheme.<sup>61</sup>

### B. *Two Competing Assessments*

The UN and AU have each conducted independent assessments that influence how they view AMISOM's future. Tensions between the two bodies about how to conduct the study precluded cooperation, resulting in two separate evaluations that covered similar ground but came to distinctly different conclusions.<sup>62</sup>

In January, the UN recommended a "reconfiguration" of AMISOM, which has been interpreted in different ways, but is widely understood to mean restructuring the mission in a manner that increasingly places the Somali army in the driver's seat of military operations to counter Al-Shabaab.<sup>63</sup>

By contrast, in May, the AU released its assessment that called for a hybrid AU-UN mission under joint leadership. This scheme would essentially merge the UN's political mission UNSOM, its logistical mission UNSOS and AMISOM into one outfit under a joint AU-UN command.<sup>64</sup> The AU favours this hybrid model in part because it would enable the mission to draw its budget from UN assessed contributions, which are a much steadier funding source than the present mechanisms.<sup>65</sup> The U.S., UK and Somali government have already made clear that they will not endorse this model, however, and some speculate that its proponents are backing it primarily to gain concessions on predictable funding but also a larger AU political role in Somalia.<sup>66</sup> There are clear operational drawbacks to a hybrid mission – such as limits on offensive action under the UN's more restrictive rules of engagement – but these have taken a back seat to other considerations.<sup>67</sup> Four troop-contributing countries (Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Burundi) are currently sitting on the AU PSC, and many observers see their influence behind the PSC's stance.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> The Farmajo administration, for instance, felt coerced into accepting the National Security Architecture (see footnote 56), and later ignored it, in effect rendering it moot. Crisis Group interview, former government official, August 2021.

<sup>62</sup> The AU wanted to co-lead the assessment and examine all aspects of international assistance to Somalia. The UN offered instead to appoint an AU expert to the UN investigation team, to which the AU said no. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats and AU officials, August-September 2021.

<sup>63</sup> "Independent Assessment of International Support to the Whole Security Environment in Somalia Post-2021", December 2020. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, August 2021.

<sup>64</sup> "Report of the Independent Assessment Team on the African Union's Engagement in and with Somalia Post-2021", 30 May 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and AU officials, August-September 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interview, diplomat from AU PSC member country, October 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and AU officials, August-September 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Kenya has been the most vocal, as Ethiopia is preoccupied with internal affairs. Egypt, an AU PSC member that does not contribute troops to AMISOM, supports a hybrid model as a means of strengthening command and control. Crisis Group interviews, former Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, AU official, Western diplomat based in Addis Ababa and Egyptian diplomat, September-October 2021.

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## IV. Priority Issues

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AMISOM's donors, in particular, face a stark choice. A first path – seeking a compromise to continue the mission in some form – is strewn with challenges. If they take it, they would have to push harder for Mogadishu and member states to repair relations and agree on a division of power and responsibilities; absent that, the Somali army will never be a credible force. That task, hard enough, is the easy part. Outside partners likely also need to create space for Somali leaders to at least explore talks with Al-Shabaab, given that the movement's defeat seems a remote prospect. Thus far, militant leaders have expressed no interest in negotiating. As a result, extending AMISOM's mandate comes with no guarantee of success. But the alternative is worse. Pulling out AMISOM would most likely let Al-Shabaab cement its grip on south-central Somalia and march on cities such as Mogadishu. Some locals would put up a fight. But the federal government, unlikely to muster a coherent response, would be at risk. A dominant Al-Shabaab would threaten a Horn of Africa that is already reeling from Ethiopia's civil war and Sudan's derailed transition.

For all the understandable concerns, AMISOM's continuation in some form is the only immediately viable means to avert that scenario. It is no long-term solution: AMISOM cannot remain in Somalia forever. But its continued presence would at least buy the Somali government time to take a shot at seeking agreements with member states, carrying out reforms that could enhance its authority and exploring wider reconciliation.

Time to find a compromise on AMISOM's future is running out. To provide additional room for manoeuvre, the UN Security Council should roll over the mission's mandate for up to six months, during which time the relevant players should hammer out a comprehensive reform plan that will steady the mission and set its course for the coming years. A short-term rollover will also give an opportunity for Somalia's prolonged electoral cycle to conclude – which will not happen until early 2022 in the most optimistic scenario – so that the incoming administration can provide its input as to AMISOM's future.

Once the short-term extension is in place, the AU and UN will need to come to terms on a structure for the mission's next iteration. Given strong resistance from both Mogadishu and New York, the hybrid approach appears to be a non-starter. The AU PSC should accordingly endorse the Security Council's and Mogadishu's preferred option of a non-hybrid, reconfigured AU mission, with the Security Council easing the sting by reciprocally committing to help the AU secure predictable funding as described below. The parties can then turn their attention to technical-level talks to flesh out the contours of the new mission. Their planning should incorporate the following considerations, in order to strike a balance between the urgency of reforms and the limited time to enact them.

### A. *Duration*

There is no realistic way to forecast when, if ever, Somali forces will be in a position to perform the functions that AMISOM serves, in particular with respect to holding

the line against Al-Shabaab.<sup>69</sup> But an indefinite commitment is out of the question, as donors stress the need to begin wrapping things up in light of prospective funding gaps, frustration with the mission's lack of progress and a desire to maintain the pressure to reform AMISOM. Against this backdrop, the task for the planners sketching out AMISOM's future will be to identify a fixed period of time that allows the reconfigured mission and the Somali government a reasonable opportunity to prepare the ground for AMISOM's departure.

Setting a long-term horizon, up to five years, could be an appropriate compromise. While there is no operational magic to the notion of five years, it does have certain advantages. It would allow for the mission's transitional period to cover the full term of the incoming Somali administration (which will end in 2026, provided that the present electoral cycle concludes in 2022), while extending beyond the projected end of the next election to help ensure shifts in security posture do not negatively affect electoral cycles. A commitment by partners to an extended time horizon for the mission, even if subject to annual mandate review, would also provide more certainty than the year-to-year cycles that have characterised discussions about AMISOM's future, and therefore allow for better planning.

A longer time horizon can be of benefit to the Somali government as well. Rather than compelling a rushed transition, it will allow any incoming administration sufficient time to generate a plan to reinvigorate the Somali security sector and address the political challenges associated with that. A flexible approach to the timeline can also serve as an incentive – if Mogadishu demonstrates clear progress in its efforts to develop the security sector, the mission's timeline could be accelerated.

## B. *Funding*

The question of who will provide funding for the mission's troop stipends remains a critical unresolved issue. Even with anticipated budgetary reductions, the EU will almost certainly continue to be the primary contributors for stipends.<sup>70</sup> The question is how to fill whatever gap – how large remains unclear thus far – will be created by the EU's new posture. Plugging it is all the harder given that shifting to UN assessed contributions – in many ways the most attractive solution – will not get past the UN Security Council. There are several possible ways to thread the needle:

- For starters, the AU should lobby other bilateral donors to contribute. Countries ranging from Turkey to Gulf monarchies to China have stepped up their engagement in Somalia in recent years, precisely because AMISOM's presence has created an enabling environment for them to do so. Some of those countries bitterly oppose Islamists but even among those that do not, none has an interest in an Al-Shabaab takeover in Somalia. AMISOM's withdrawal would undermine their ability to operate in the country. They have a clear interest in supporting its activities.

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<sup>69</sup> "Realistically, AMISOM needs to stay ten more years. But the EU would die if they heard that". Crisis Group interview, former Somali security official, August 2021.

<sup>70</sup> EU funding could also be provided more generally to the AU for stabilisation efforts in Somalia. The AU would have to satisfy reporting requirements, but this step would allow greater flexibility for all. At present, EU funding is earmarked for troop stipends. Crisis Group interview, former Western defence attaché to the AU, September 2021.

- ❑ Secondly, the UN Security Council could help close the gap by creatively seeking to supplement the UNSOS budget as a means of channelling increased support toward AMISOM and by encouraging member states to top up AMISOM's trust fund.
- ❑ Thirdly, the AU itself needs to seriously consider the level of financial contributions it can make in the coming years. The AU argues it provides its support in kind and pays through member state troop casualties. This is true enough, but the mission's urgent financial needs demand more flexibility, which could include drawing a small amount from the AU Peace Fund, despite previous reservations with regard to using these monies for AMISOM.

Beyond the question of who provides funding, a second challenge relates to ensuring the AU has sufficient information for planning. In the past, donors have, understandably, wanted to see plans for AMISOM before releasing funds. Yet without at least a rough sense of available money, the AU will struggle to put together a credible plan. One way through the dilemma would be for donors, particularly the EU, to communicate a maximum financial contribution for the mission's entire multi-year duration. The AU would thus attain some clarity for planning, even if the precise amount of European funding is then negotiated based on actual plans. Giving such a figure in advance could also allow the AU to identify potential funding gaps and approach other possible donors, as described above.

### C. *Composition*

Planning for AMISOM's next phases should include a review of the mission's troop composition. Officials from the East African contributing countries frequently point out that their troops have paid a heavy price in combat with Al-Shabaab, with thousands killed or injured since the mission first deployed – and there is some debate in each country about the continued utility of deployments in Somalia.<sup>71</sup> Several governments seem equivocal about the continuing need to participate. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni frequently threatens to withdraw from AMISOM, citing Somali political dysfunction. Ethiopia is struggling with its own civil conflict and has already withdrawn some soldiers that are not under AMISOM command. A further escalation of the Tigray war would probably call its participation in AMISOM into question altogether.<sup>72</sup> Kenya's political opposition is sceptical of the troop deployments in Somalia and may decide to make it a topic of debate in the 2022 election campaign.<sup>73</sup>

At the same time, Mogadishu is correct to note that some troop-contributing countries indeed appear to be using AMISOM to pursue interests other than securing Somalia. The pursuit of such interests has not only undermined perceptions of the mission's neutrality but also resulted in disjointed command and control. Contingent commanders typically answer to their capitals' demands first and to the AMISOM

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<sup>71</sup> "What Kenya stands to gain and lose by withdrawing from Somalia", *The Conversation*, 30 April 2020.

<sup>72</sup> "The Ethiopian National Defense Force is also coming under pressure by Western nations, which advocate limiting the involvement of forces that participated in the Tigray war in peacekeeping missions". Crisis Group interviews, former Ethiopian diplomat and AMISOM adviser, August-September 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomat, AMISOM adviser and AMISOM officials, August-September 2021.



force commander's second; while multilateral peace operations often suffer from this problem, the prominence of front-line states such as Ethiopia and Kenya exacerbates it in this mission. Both AMISOM and its partners have tried several times to resolve this issue, with limited success.<sup>74</sup>

The situation is unlikely to improve as long as the troop contributors remain the same, so the AU should explore the possibility of adding to the roster, in turn diluting the current contributors' dominance. The organisation could invite other member states to supply troops while ensuring that the five current East African contributors can still contribute. To move in this direction, the AU should undertake an assessment of present and potential new troop-contributing countries with a view to recruiting those with troops that are up to the task.

Ideally, the mission's reconfiguration will involve updating its capabilities in line with the evolving threat from Al-Shabaab. It should, for instance, launch more frequent mobile operations to match the militants' agility and recruit personnel who are equipped to defuse explosive devices, which have lately become Al-Shabaab's weapon of choice.<sup>75</sup> Adding engineering and logistical capacities in a manner that allows it to transfer these skills to the Somali army is another oft cited need.<sup>76</sup> The AU should seek contributors who can provide the needed specialised skills and complement existing capabilities. Securing participation in AMISOM by countries outside East Africa has been challenging in the past, but diplomats suggest renewed interest on the part of some AU member states.<sup>77</sup>

#### D. *Moving Beyond Holding*

Any future peace support mission, even if it adds fresh capabilities and takes on new responsibilities, must address the concerns behind AMISOM's static posture. AMISOM feels the need to hold the territory it has recovered given the lack of backfill from Somali partner forces. This problem is persistent, and reversing the dynamic is part of the long-term struggle to develop the Somali security sector described elsewhere in this briefing.<sup>78</sup> A reconfigured mission will need to undertake steps to free up its troops from becoming holding forces.

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<sup>74</sup> The force commander initiated a plan to address this issue in late 2020, but with few tangible results. Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, August 2021.

<sup>75</sup> "Letter from the Chair of the Security Council Committee to the President of the Security Council on Somalia", 1 November 2019.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interview, former Somali military commander, October 2021. Adding new capabilities could also increase certain mission costs, however, as equipment is often more expensive than troops. Crisis Group interview, EU official, August 2021.

<sup>77</sup> It is unclear how far these discussions have progressed. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomat, UN official and AMISOM adviser, August-September 2021. The AU PSC in October referred to an "expansion of the pool of [troop-contributing countries] to other willing and interested AU member states". "Communiqué of the 1037th meeting of the PSC held on 7 October 2021 on the Situation in Somalia and the status of the consultations on the Independent Assessment Report on AU Mission in Somalia Post-2021", 11 October 2021.

<sup>78</sup> A joint UN-AU assessment in 2019 called for Somali forces to take over twelve forward operating bases by December of that year as a means of freeing up 2,000 AMISOM troops. UNSC S/2019/388, 13 May 2019. AMISOM agreed with the government to hand over bases in Sector One (Lower Shabelle) in 2021, but Mogadishu later said it was not ready. Somali forces took over the base at Afgooye in March 2021, despite a last-minute government request for a postponement, which AMISOM refused,

To this end, a future mission should focus on closing select AMISOM locations that serve little strategic purpose. AMISOM maintains over 70 forward operating bases in six sectors. Forward operating bases generally protect either a town or a supply route, but some are far-flung and the troops stationed there rarely leave the barracks to conduct patrols.<sup>79</sup> By reducing the number of bases, AMISOM could either completely withdraw some troops (and cut costs) or reassign soldiers to offensive operations, for example by establishing a mobile strike force in each sector that can more actively pursue Al-Shabaab. While these measures may raise the risk of losing territory to Al-Shabaab, if chosen carefully, closing a few select locations without Somali forces taking over should not have serious security ramifications as major cities and supply routes continue to enjoy protection.

The AU, in conjunction with the Somali government, should therefore conduct a joint comprehensive forward operating base assessment as part of any reconfiguration plan, reviewing the strategic and operational value of bases in all sectors. The parties should then agree upon which ones can be closed in the near term and which need to be maintained.

#### E. *Addressing Political Challenges*

Such military efforts will count for little – indeed, are probably not even feasible – absent accompanying political measures. The main challenge Somalia's international partners face is to ensure that any extension of AMISOM's mandate is accompanied by concerted efforts to push Somali actors toward taking such steps.

Crucial is to roll out the strongest possible process to encourage reconciliation between the federal government and the member states. Somalia must take this step, in order not only to emerge from protracted political and security crisis, but also to recruit from member state populations the forces that Mogadishu needs to build a strengthened Somali army that can stand on its own. The conclusion of Somalia's electoral cycle will present an opportunity to focus on reconciliation.

As a first step, the UN – which, through UNSOM, has the lead among outside actors for political mediation efforts in Somalia – should work with the Horn's regional bloc, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the AU and other partners to push the new administration to initiate a mechanism that sees regular political engagement between the elite in Mogadishu and those in state capitals.<sup>80</sup> One model

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while AMISOM left its base at Marin Gubay in June, though no Somali forces replaced them. Crisis Group interview, AMISOM official, August 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former Somali defence official, U.S. and AMISOM official, August-September 2021. One Western official who has deep experience with AMISOM suggested that the mission could close half its forward operating bases without major adverse effect. Crisis Group interview, Western defence official, September 2021.

<sup>80</sup> The AU in recent years has pushed for a re-evaluation of its division of labour with the UN whereby it focuses on security while the UN deals with politics, saying it is difficult to run a peace operation that is not involved in pursuing a domestic political settlement. "This is a red line for us", an AU official said of the need to secure an enhanced political role for the organisation in Somalia. Crisis Group interview, September 2021. This stance is linked to feelings of frustration within the AU that AMISOM's performance is under scrutiny, while UNSOM's is not. Crisis Group interviews, AU and AMISOM official, September 2021. The UN counters that the AU is already sufficiently engaged politically in Somalia through existing structures. Crisis Group interview, UNSOM official, November 2021.

might be the National Security Council meetings that transpired early in the Farmajo administration. Somalia's partners should then press for that forum to be used for discussions about how to reach a lasting settlement of the thorny power- and resource-sharing questions that have hampered the development of Somalia's federal system to date. Resolving those major unanswered questions will in turn allow for progress to be made on key governance tasks such as finalising the provisional constitution and security reforms, contributing to conditions that will allow Somalia to take over as the primary security provider in the country.

Whether a political settlement should include actors like Al-Shabaab poses even more challenging questions. East African governments like Kenya and Ethiopia have to date been reluctant to entertain the idea of engaging militants.<sup>81</sup> As for Al-Shabaab leaders, they may believe they can wait until the international forces that have checked their ambitions for fourteen years lose patience and depart. Still, it is hard to envisage a path toward resolution of Somalia's long-running conflict that fails to involve some negotiation between the principal antagonists. While the decision about whether to try to engage Al-Shabaab will ultimately be a Somali one, the UN political mission can help stimulate discussion about this possibility among Somalia's neighbours and international partners, with an eye toward coming to a wider consensus on the appropriate future pathways to dealing with the regional security threat Al-Shabaab poses. The UN should also stand ready to assist the Somali government with any outreach if asked to do so. (Crisis Group will publish a longer paper in the months ahead on prospects for engaging Al-Shabaab).

## V. Conclusion

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After fourteen years in Somalia, AMISOM is at a crossroads. Its operating posture is stagnant and donors are frustrated by the lack of progress. AMISOM's diverse partners and implementers have struggled to agree on a way forward. With time running out, the UN Security Council should adopt a six-month mandate rollover so that AMISOM's partners can forge consensus on a reconfigured mission, ideally with a horizon of up to five years. That would buy time for Somalia's elites to pursue political settlements – between Mogadishu and member states and, possibly, with Al-Shabaab itself or at least parts of it – that would make an eventual withdrawal less dangerous. Success, even on such a timeline, is far from guaranteed: Somalia's political landscape remains fractured and thus far Al-Shabaab leaders offer little sign of compromise. But the alternative – pulling out the AU mission – would enable dramatic Al-Shabaab gains, with militants potentially even toppling the government and seizing the capital. For all its flaws, extending AMISOM's mandate and providing the resources it needs to function is the better option.

**Nairobi/Brussels, 15 November 2021**

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<sup>81</sup> Kenyan officials are particularly opposed, while Ethiopia has not articulated a view on the matter since the change of administration that brought Abiy Ahmed to power in April 2018. Its security officials have, however, historically been strongly averse to any engagement with Al-Shabaab, worrying that an Islamist government in Mogadishu would have an expansionist agenda. Crisis Group interviews, Kenyan and Ethiopian officials, 2019-2021.



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