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Where to now? – the role of AMISOM after February 2021

Background

When the African Union (AU) mission in Somalia ([AMISOM](#)) was deployed in 2007, there was a widespread expectation in the AU that AMISOM would be replaced and re-hatted by a United Nations (UN) Peace Mission force after six months. The re-hatting of the mission never took place, and the AMISOM is currently in its thirteenth year of deployment, in a mission that the UN has argued is too dangerous for the UN to take over. The AMISOM mission has resulted in the death of [several 1000 AMISOM soldiers](#) and is now in its last stretch. The [current mandate, UNSCR 2520, ends on 28 February 2021](#) and it is expected that the current mission will be replaced by a follow-up mission by the end of 2021 at the latest. The nature and shape of such a follow-up mission is yet to be determined.

Discussion

Security in Somalia – where are we?

AMISOM has been criticised for not achieving its mandated objectives of bringing peace and stability to Somalia. It is correct that the Al-Shabaab (AS) insurgent movement is still active and present in most parts of South-Central Somalia. It is also correct that AMISOM has not managed to create full freedom of movement, and that Somalia largely still consists of islands of security, within a “sea” of insecure areas outside these typically urban centres. AS is still perceived to have a rather high level of [legitimacy](#) amongst wide sections of the Somali population, and have managed to effectively use strategic communication and social media to promote its Somali-nationalist, jihadist narrative. One of the challenges for AMISOM and the international community is the idea of “AS being all of us”, i.e. AS is everywhere and everybody knows somebody with ties to AS.

AMISOM has managed to weaken AS to such an extent that the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), via the regional federal member states (FMS) are present in most parts of Somalia. Elections were scheduled for November 2020, but has been postponed to 8 February 2021 due to the political deadlock on the delineation of responsibility between the FGS and the FMS. This is important because the political deadlock has blocked the creation of effective security forces, and coordinated security responses to the challenge posed by AS. However, the most significant challenge has been and remains that the FGS and the FMS do not have a coherent and viable political project to implement, which undermines the efforts of trying to eliminate the threat posed by AS. Currently there is not an agreement on the distribution of power and roles between the FGS in the centre, and the FMS. The principle of [“one man, one vote” that](#) has been promoted as part of the new Somalia, has been set aside for an indirect election process. The FMS does not trust relinquishing power and control to the FGS in the centre. The recent military confrontations between Somali National Army forces, and military units from Jubaland is an illustration of the distrust.

The problem is at-least two-fold; The lack of an effective security sector in Somalia means that the Somalis so far have not been able to take over the security responsibility from AMISOM as outlined in the [Somali Transition Plan](#) (STP), and is unlikely to be able to do so in the short to medium term. The reality is that were AMISOM to withdraw now or in a few months, the FGS would likely collapse and the AS might take over. The lack of a clear political project has resulted in several missed opportunities for the Somalis. AMISOM has created the needed security space for a genuine political process to be initiated, but the Somalis have failed to do so. As long as the Somalis do not take the lead in creating a sustainable political solution and developing a grand and inclusive political plan for the Somali project, the conflict is likely to continue. The continued presence of international security forces undertaking substantial portions of security provision will not help the FGS in creating legitimacy. There is a need for significant pressure on the Somali authorities to take ownership for creating sustainable solutions for Somalia.

The catch-22 for AMISOM and the international community

Sustainable peace is a critical challenge in most contemporary peace missions with Mali, DR Congo, Central African Republic and Somalia being cases in point. A common thread in these missions has been that the initial progress and space for peace made by the military contingents are not followed up by the required political and institutional presence to secure sustainable peace. The peace mission in Somalia highlights that reducing the capacity of the insurgent movement, the AS in particular, is not sufficient in creating sustainable peace. The kinetic military efforts must be paired with effective and immediate developmental and governance initiatives. Military efforts alone will not provide the needed results. However, the military presence and campaigns in Somalia have created some room that could have been, and still can be, used to find a political solution. The FGS and the FMS have so far not managed to constructively use and fill the space created by AMISOM in addressing the root causes of the conflicts, which fundamentally are political in nature.

There is no military solution to the conflict in Somalia, and the international community cannot force Somalia to find a solution. The international community is caught in a catch-22 in the sense that as long as the international community, including AMISOM, continues to be significant providers of development, service delivery and security in Somalia, the Somali's have proven both incapable and unwilling to take over the responsibility for security. This could be seen as a valid argument for closing the AMISOM military presence and rapidly forcing the Somali authorities to take over the responsibility for security provision and state functions. The challenge with this logic is that the FGS and FMS at this stage do not have a coherent and sustainable political project, i.e. the elites do not agree on what kind of Somalia they want that allows for the international presence, including security provision, to be scaled down.

Concluding remarks

If AMISOM leaves Somalia by 2021, the embryonic Somali state-building project will likely collapse. A post-AMISOM deployment consequently needs to be robust enough to secure the fragile Somali state-building project, but at the same time have a light footprint to compel the Somalis to take the lead and develop a comprehensive political project. Without a political project and commitment from Somali authorities, the conflict is likely to continue for years to come. In a follow-up brief, the focus will be on the limitations of the military tool in peace missions.

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