

# UN Peacekeeping: Ripping Up The Rulebook

RICHARD GOWAN WRITES ON WHAT THE UNITED NATIONS SUPERVISION MISSION IN SYRIA (UNSMIS) CAN REALLY ACHIEVE AND DRAWS COMPARISONS TO THE CURRENT SITUATION IN SOUTH SUDAN.

Over the last decade, there has been a lot of talk about the transformation of United Nations peacekeeping. The UN has downplayed “traditional” operational tasks, such as monitoring contested borders and observing ceasefires. Instead, it has emphasised the importance of complex operations aimed at rebuilding failed states after civil wars, promoting the rule of law and supporting elections.

But over the last year, the UN has mounted two high-risk missions that did not follow this new template. In mid-2011, South Sudan’s transition to independence from Khartoum was suddenly interrupted by fighting in the disputed region of Abyei. UN troops in the area – constrained by poor supply lines – could do little. Ethiopia offered a larger force to oversee Abyei’s demilitarization. Yet in the year since the Ethiopians arrived, further clashes along the border between the Sudans have presaged a new war.

This episode brought back memories of Cold War peacekeeping deployments to volatile border zones, such as the dispatch of UN forces to the Sinai after the Suez crisis and the original deployment of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in 1978. Critics have argued that this sort of deployment can stop a conflict but not resolve it – a fact amply demonstrated by UNIFIL now been in place for over three decades. UN officials have also compared the Abyei mission to the UN Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea, an initially successful border monitoring force that was closed in 2008 because of Eritrean obstructionism.

Eritrea’s discontent arose from the UN’s inability to enforce a legal commission’s decision that Ethiopia should hand over an especially sensitive tract of territory. The Sudanese case is even more complex and the fact that important oil deposits are strung along the border makes it even harder to fix. If the struggle for these resources does spark a war – a threat that seems very high at the time of writing – it will reinforce the argument that the UN should avoid other unresolved or irresolvable border conflicts. But that won’t stop the Security Council hurling peacekeeping forces at such conflicts in future. For many diplomats sitting in the Council, talk about the complexities of long-term peacekeeping remains an irritating distraction. They, and their political masters, simply need short-term answers to urgent crises.

This truth of UN diplomacy was rammed home by the Council’s April 2012 decision to deploy three hundred UN monitors in support of Kofi Annan’s peace plan for Syria. Although the UN

*Below: UNSMIS Military Observers meeting Syrian citizens.*





Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) was launched to observe a ceasefire between government and rebel forces, the best that could be said was the violence diminished during the first phase of their deployment. Nonetheless, killings continued and the UN observers soon found themselves under attack.

UN officials argued that such a small mission could not be expected to halt the fighting. Instead, they hoped that the monitors' presence might create a brief political window for Annan to initiate peace talks. For the Security Council's members the decision to deploy the mission at least represented something that they could agree on after nearly a year of fruitless – and often bitter – debates on Syria.

Even so, the Council's members struggled to agree on what UNSMIS should do. Russia, which has always viewed efforts to reform peacekeeping with suspicion, essentially argued that the operation should be an extremely limited observer mission – again recalling Cold War precedents in the Middle East. By contrast, the U.S. and its Western allies argued that the mission should be able to investigate human rights abuses and have some capacity to track political events. Creditably, governments from Burkina Faso to Yemen – and Ireland – offered personnel to the mission. But the continued violence on the ground and high-level struggle in New York set severe limits on what UNSMIS could hope to deliver.

It didn't take long for the UN's critics to call UNSMIS a failure. At the time of writing – with over 250 of the military personnel already on the ground – it is not clear how long it will function. UN officials will not be sorry if the experiment of putting unarmed personnel in a war zone is never repeated again.

But the deployments to Abyei and Syria offer some chastening lessons about peacekeeping's place in a troubled international system. The big, complex peace operations of the last decade have been presented as contributions to a grand progressive global enterprise: they have aimed not only to save lives, but to

*Above: Major General Robert Mood, Head of UNSMIS.*

help haul whole societies out of disorder and poverty. That remains a noble goal and there are cases, such as Liberia, where the UN can claim to have achieved a great deal despite many setbacks.

But Syria and Abyei are reminders that UN peacekeepers can be deployed for more basic reasons: to damp down a spreading conflict or help major powers save face during a diplomatic dispute. In a period in which tensions between the major powers often run high – and the funds for transforming whole societies are in short supply – limited missions of this type may be common. While UN officials have rewritten the peacekeeping rulebook in recent years, they may now have to rip it up and start afresh.



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