

Protection of Civilians in United Nations Interim Security Forces for Abyei - UNISFA: Legal Standards and Field Implementation

Colonel Jumanne Sauji

Ministry of Defence, Tanzania

Abstract

This article explores the protection of civilians (PoC) under the mandate of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA). It provides an in-depth analysis of the legal foundations of civilian protection, the unique operational challenges in the Abyei Area, and the strategies adopted by UNISFA in the absence of state institutions. Through field practices such as Joint Community Peace Committees, gender-sensitive patrols, and community liaison initiatives, the mission has succeeded in reducing violence and building trust among conflict-affected populations. However, constraints such as a limited mandate, lack of police or judicial authority, and difficult terrain continue to hamper the mission's full implementation of its protection mandate. The article concludes by offering comprehensive recommendations for mandate revision, improved coordination with humanitarian actors, and long-term peacebuilding efforts. It emphasizes that effective civilian protection requires both international engagement and strong local ownership, especially in politically sensitive and stateless environments like Abyei.

Keywords: UNISFA, civilian protection, Abyei, peacekeeping, mandate, community engagement, gender, UN, PoC.

1. Introduction

The United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) was established in June 2011 following the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1990. This followed renewed violence and forced displacement in the Abyei Area, a disputed territory between Sudan and South Sudan. The region's volatility stems from unresolved border demarcations, ethnic tensions between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities, and the broader geopolitical instability in the Horn of Africa. UNISFA was tasked primarily with maintaining security in the area, facilitating humanitarian access, and protecting civilians. Among these tasks, the protection of civilians (PoC) remains the most immediate and morally compelling. Protection of civilians is a core mandate of many contemporary United Nations peacekeeping operations, especially in fragile and post-conflict contexts. The Abyei Area has remained under threat from intercommunal clashes, armed militias, and the absence of formal government structures. As such, UNISFA's ability to shield vulnerable populations from harm is both a legal obligation and a practical necessity for mission success and legitimacy.

This article examines the legal standards that govern UNISFA's protection of civilian's mandate and analyses how these are implemented in the field. It seeks to bridge the gap between legal doctrine and

operational practice. By exploring the legal frameworks, operational rules, field-level interventions, and the challenges faced by the mission, this study provides a comprehensive assessment of PoC in UNISFA. It also draws lessons from specific incidents and offers recommendations for strengthening future protection strategies.

2. Legal Frameworks for the Protection of Civilians

The Protection of Civilians (PoC) in UN peacekeeping operations is anchored in a robust body of international law, normative instruments, and operational policies developed over the past seven decades. This legal and normative framework provides both the authority and the guidance for missions like the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) to intervene and protect civilians facing threats of violence. The framework also serves to clarify the responsibilities of peacekeepers, establish threshold for action, and harmonize responses with principles of sovereignty, human rights, and international humanitarian law.

2.1 The UN Charter and Security Council Authority

At the heart of UN peacekeeping lies the Charter of the United Nations, especially Articles 1, 24, and Chapter VII provisions. Article 1 underscores the UN's purpose to maintain international peace and security, while Article 24 assigns the Security Council the primary responsibility for achieving this. Under Chapter VII, the Council may authorize the use of force to address threats to international peace, as per Articles 39 to 42.

UNISFA was established through Security Council Resolution 1990 (2011), which invoked Chapter VII authority to authorize the deployment of troops and permit the use of force. The resolution explicitly mandated the protection of civilians under imminent threat of physical violence. This legal basis affirms the legitimacy of UNISFA's actions when using force to prevent or respond to acts of violence, even in the absence of a host nation request given Abyei's unique, stateless status.

2.2 International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

International Humanitarian Law (IHL), also known as the law of armed conflict, provides core principles governing the conduct of hostilities and the protection of persons not participating in conflict. The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols are the primary treaties in this domain.

Key IHL principles relevant to PoC include:

- **Distinction:** Parties to a conflict must distinguish between combatants and civilians.
- **Proportionality:** Attacks must not cause excessive civilian harm relative to the military advantage gained.
- **Precaution:** Parties must take feasible steps to minimize harm to civilians.

Although UN peacekeepers are not typically parties to a conflict, their presence in areas of armed confrontation imposes an obligation to respect and ensure respect for IHL. In Abyei, where armed clashes between Misseriya and Ngok Dinka militias often result in civilian casualties, these principles guide UNISFA in minimizing harm while protecting communities.

2.3 International Human Rights Law (IHRL)

International Human Rights Law applies at all times, in peace and in war. Instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966), and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) establish the legal foundations for protecting the dignity, life, and liberty of individuals.

UN missions are bound by the UN's Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP), which ensures that all UN-supported forces act in compliance with IHRL. Though UNISFA lacks a large human rights section, its military personnel are expected to prevent and report violations, particularly those involving sexual and gender-based violence, arbitrary detention, child recruitment, or attacks on civilian objects such as schools or hospitals.

In the Abyei context, where civilians live without state protection or access to basic rights, IHRL becomes particularly critical. The responsibility falls on UNISFA to ensure that their operations not only prevent violence but also foster a protective environment for vulnerable populations.

2.4 Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

The Responsibility to Protect is a political commitment endorsed at the 2005 World Summit. It affirms that:

- States have the primary responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.
- The international community has a responsibility to assist states in fulfilling this duty.
- If a state fails to protect its population, the international community must be prepared to take collective action through the UN.

In the case of Abyei, neither Sudan nor South Sudan exercises effective control over the area, and both have failed to prevent inter-communal violence. UNISFA thus operates under an implied R2P mandate acting as a surrogate protective authority in a stateless region where the risk of atrocity crimes, including ethnic cleansing, remains ever present.

2.5 UN Policy on the Protection of Civilians (2015)

The UN Policy on PoC in Peacekeeping Operations (2015), developed by the Department of Peace Operations (DPO), offers a practical framework for missions. It outlines a three-tiered approach:

- Protection through Political Process: Supporting political solutions that address the root causes of conflict.
- Provision of Physical Protection: Using military and police capabilities to deter, prevent, and respond to threats.
- Establishment of a Protective Environment: Promoting rule of law, human rights, and access to services.

UNISFA, with its narrow military mandate, primarily operates within the second tier. However, it has also taken limited steps toward the third tier by supporting humanitarian access and informal community governance structures. The first-tier political engagement remains underdeveloped due to the absence of a functioning political track in Abyei.

2.6 Customary International Law and Peacekeeping Practice

Customary law also informs PoC by reinforcing obligations found in treaties and practice. For instance, norms prohibiting the targeting of civilians or humanitarian workers are now universally binding. Additionally, the Brahimi Report (2000) and HIPPO Report (2015) emphasize that UN peacekeepers must not stand by in the face of mass violence—a standard that has become widely accepted.

UNISFA's Rules of Engagement (RoE) reflect this evolution by authorizing pre-emptive deployment, rapid reaction, and use of force to defend civilians from credible threats.

3. UNISFA's Mandate and Operational Context

3.1 Origins and Rationale for Establishing UNISFA

The United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) was established by the United Nations Security Council under Resolution 1990 (2011), following violent clashes between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in the disputed Abyei Area. These hostilities erupted amid rising tensions ahead of South Sudan's secession from Sudan in July 2011. The violence resulted in mass displacement of the Ngok Dinka population, the burning of homes, looting, and summary executions amounting to widespread human rights violations.

UNISFA was deployed in response to an agreement signed on 20 June 2011 between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), under the mediation of the African Union High Level Implementation Panel. The agreement called for the withdrawal of all armed forces from Abyei and the establishment of a neutral security force, which would maintain peace and allow for the return of displaced persons.

Ethiopia offered to contribute the entire military contingent, and this offer was accepted by both parties and the Security Council. Thus, UNISFA became the first and only UN peacekeeping mission composed entirely of troops from a single country.

3.2 Mandate Components under Chapter VII Authority

UNISFA was authorized under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which grants the Security Council authority to take enforcement measures to maintain international peace and security. Its initial mandate was to:

- Monitor and verify the withdrawal of armed forces from the Abyei Area.
- Provide security and ensure the freedom of movement of UN personnel, humanitarian actors, and civilians.
- Protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence.
- Support the delivery of humanitarian aid and facilitate access to affected populations.
- Support the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism (JBVMM).

Over the years, the Security Council has extended and adapted UNISFA's mandate through subsequent resolutions. Notably, Resolution 2024 (2011), Resolution 2075 (2012) and Resolution 2760 (2024) incorporated support for border demarcation, cooperation with Sudan and South Sudan, and the prevention of arms proliferation. However, despite these additions, UNISFA has remained a military-heavy and narrowly configured mission, lacking substantive civilian, police, or judicial components.

3.3 The Political Status of the Abyei Area

Abyei is an oil-rich, strategically located territory straddling the border between Sudan's South Kordofan State and South Sudan's Unity State. Its final status was supposed to be determined through a referendum under the terms of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). However, disagreements over eligibility criteria—especially the participation of the nomadic Misseriya—led to the referendum being indefinitely postponed.

As a result, Abyei remains in a legal and political limbo:

- It is not administered by either Sudan or South Sudan.
- The Abyei Area Administration proposed in the CPA was never operationalized.
- There is no functioning judicial, policing, or civil governance structures in place.
- The region operates as a de facto UN-administered zone, with UNISFA filling many governance gaps.

This vacuum presents significant operational challenges for UNISFA, as the mission is often expected to

perform tasks that fall outside its formal mandate, such as mediating disputes, facilitating service delivery, and coordinating humanitarian interventions.

3.4 Ethnic Composition and Sources of Conflict

Abyei is home primarily to the Ngok Dinka, an ethnic group culturally and politically affiliated with South Sudan. However, it is also seasonally traversed by the Misseriya, an Arab nomadic pastoralist community from Sudan, who move south in search of water and pasture during the dry season.

Tensions between these communities are fueled by:

- Land ownership disputes.
- Access to grazing areas and water points.
- Historical grievances, including atrocities committed during the Second Sudanese Civil War.
- The unresolved final status of Abyei and its political symbolism.

These tensions often manifest in violent clashes, cattle raids, abductions, and attacks on villages. As there is no functional local police or judiciary, cycles of revenge killings continue unchecked. UNISFA, though not a law enforcement agency, often steps in to mediate, monitor, and mitigate these communal conflicts.

3.5 UNISFA's Force Composition and Deployment Strategy

UNISFA maintains a troop ceiling of 3,500 uniformed personnel, with the drawn from different countries around the world, majority being from Bangladesh, China, Ghana, India, Pakistan and Vietnam. The force structure includes:

- Sector headquarters for northern, central, and southern Abyei.
- Military Observation Posts (MOPs) along key roads and conflict-prone areas.
- Mobile patrol units for long- and short-range surveillance.
- Rapid Reaction Teams (RRTs) equipped to respond to threats within hours.

Key strategic locations include:

- Abyei Town – the administrative and logistical center.
- Amiet Market – an inter-communal trade hub and frequent flashpoint.
- Diffra Oil Fields – controlled by Sudanese forces and heavily militarized.
- Agok – a humanitarian and medical service hub now vulnerable due to reduced operations.

UNISFA also hosts a Limited Civilian Component, including a Head of Mission (HOM), Mission Chief of Staff, Chief Mission Support, Political Affairs Officers, Human Rights Officers, Chief Liaison Officer, and Gender Advisors.

3.6 Coordination with Local and Regional Actors

Despite its limited scope, UNISFA cooperates with several actors, including:

- Traditional leaders from both Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities.
- Humanitarian agencies such as WFP, OCHA, IOM, and MSF.
- The African Union and IGAD, especially on political mediation.
- Sudanese and South Sudanese Joint Border Committees.

However, these relationships are often hampered by:

- Lack of formal local governance.
- Politicization of security incidents.
- Restricted movement imposed by national authorities.
- Limited trust between communities and external actors.

UNISFA has succeeded in setting up mechanisms like the Joint Community Peace Committee (JCPC), but it lacks the resources and mandate depth to turn these into sustainable institutions.

4. Field Implementation of Protection of Civilians in Abyei

4.1 Strategic Approach to PoC Implementation

Although UNISFA was deployed with a primarily military configuration and without the typical multidimensional features of UN peacekeeping missions, it has taken significant measures to implement the Protection of Civilians (PoC) on the ground. Its approach is driven by necessity, adapting to the unique realities of Abyei's stateless governance, limited infrastructure, and persistent communal tensions.

UNISFA operationalizes the UN's three-tiered PoC strategy, with particular emphasis on the second-tier provision of physical protection. This involves the direct deployment of troops to areas where civilians face imminent threats. While its capacity to support the political process (Tier 1) and build a protective environment (Tier 3) is limited, the mission has innovated to bridge gaps through pragmatic engagement with communities, proactive patrolling, and early warning systems.

4.2 Preventive and Reactive Military Deployments

UNISFA's military forces are strategically positioned in key locations across the Abyei Area. The force operates static bases, mobile patrols, and rapid reaction teams to ensure both preventive presence and responsive capacity. Key methods include:

- Long-Range Patrols (LRPs): These missions often last for 2 – 5 days and are designed to cover remote areas, assess local conditions, and deter violence through visible presence.
- Short-Range Patrols (SRPs): Conducted daily or multiple times a week around Abyei Town, Amiet Market, and other vulnerable points.
- Quick Reaction Forces (QRFs): Rapidly mobilized units stationed in key locations like Abyei, Diffra and Todach to respond within short notice of a reported threat.
- Night Patrols: Deployed in conflict prone zones to prevent nocturnal attacks, cattle theft, or abductions. Each patrol is coordinated with local interlocutors and community leaders, often with interpreters or community liaison assistants to bridge language and trust gaps. The effectiveness of these patrols lies in their deterrent effect, communities often report a decrease in violence during patrol presence.

4.3 Civilian Protection during Migration Seasons

A particularly volatile period in Abyei is the seasonal migration of the Misseriya community. This movement frequently leads to disputes. UNISFA has developed migration corridors, pre-negotiated paths agreed upon by both communities, with the force ensuring their safe use.

During these migrations, UNISFA enhances its:

- Escort patrols for vulnerable populations.
- Monitoring posts along agreed migration routes.
- Mediation efforts between community leaders when disputes arise.
- Presence at cattle markets and water wells to prevent violence.

This preventive strategy has been successful in many years, though sporadic violence still occurs due to the fragility of inter – communal agreements and external provocations.

4.4 Coordination with Humanitarian and Civilian Agencies

Although UNISFA lacks a robust civilian component, it maintains close collaboration with UN humanitarian agencies and NGOs operating in Abyei. These include:

- OCHA – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

- UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Education Fund.
- UNMAS – United Nations Mine Action Service. For mine action in contaminated areas.
- MSF – Medecins Sans Frontiers or (Doctor Without Borders). For emergency medical support during violent episodes.
- WHO – World Health Organization.
- IOM – International Organization for Migration. For tracking displacement.
- WFP – World Food Program. For food distribution logistics.

UNISFA facilitates humanitarian corridors, ensures access to Internally Displaced Persons camps, and secures aid convoys, especially during the rainy season when roads become impassable and air drops are the only viable delivery method.

Despite the absence of a formal Civil Affairs Unit, military observers and sector commanders often act as de facto interlocutors with the humanitarian community. Coordination meetings and joint assessments help ensure that the military component’s presence enhances, rather than restricts, aid delivery and civilian resilience.

4.5 Community Engagement and Local Dialogue

UNISFA has implemented a number of community-based protection initiatives to complement its military presence:

- Joint Community Peace Committees (JCPCs): Forum comprising Ngok Dinka and Misseriya elders, women, and youth, aimed at resolving local disputes and de – escalating tensions.
- Protection Focal Points (PFPs): Community members designated to alert UNISFA of emerging threats, especially in areas where mobile coverage is unreliable.
- Women’s Engagement Platforms: Promoting the participation of women in peace and security dialogues, including the reporting of sexual violence.
- Humanitarian Liaison Officers: Embedded within military units to support civilian protection alerts and referrals.

Through these mechanisms, UNISFA has managed to build incremental trust with s populations on both sides, though skepticism remains, especially among those who perceive the mission as favoring one community over another.

4.6 Gender-Sensitive PoC Operations

The mission has also made efforts to mainstream gender perspectives into PoC by deploying female officers strategically, engaging women’s groups, and raising awareness on Gender Based Violence. UNISFA deploys them strategically in:

- Mixed – gender patrols, especially during market days and visits to schools and health centers.
- Engagement with women’s groups to assess protection concerns and barriers to reporting.
- Awareness – raising sessions on gender – based violence (GBV), involving traditional leaders and elders.

These activities are often accompanied by sensitized campaigns targeting both Ngok Dinka and Misseriya populations, advocating for peaceful coexistence, child protection, and access to health services.

4.7 Limitations and Successes

UNISFA’s PoC implementation has shown tangible outcomes, such as:

- Significant reduction in mass casualty events since deployment.
- Facilitation of over 50 inter-communal dialogues in the five past years.

- Rapid response to incidents of abductions and armed incursions.

However, challenges remain. The lack of judicial authority, community policing, and civil administration prevents long term conflict resolution. The mission also lacks the capacity for forensic investigations or accountability mechanisms, meaning many incidents go unpunished.

Despite these constraints, UNISFA's adaptive field implementation model has managed to preserve a fragile peace in a highly volatile region.

5. Operational Challenges and Gaps

While the UNISFA has achieved a measure of stability in the Abyei area, it continues to face significant structural, political, and logistical challenges that constrain its ability to fully realize its Protection of Civilians mandate. These challenges stem from the mission's design, the area's contested political status, complex inter – communal dynamics, and a lack of enabling infrastructure and institutional partners.

5.1 Mandate Limitations and Narrow Configuration

Unlike most UN peacekeeping missions, UNISFA was created as a military-only operation with a narrowly defined set of tasks. It lacks a full multidimensional mandate, which would typically include civilian, judicial, police, and development components. The result is that UNISFA:

- Cannot arrest or prosecute individuals involved in violence.
- Lacks the mandate to support long-term rule of law or transitional justice.
- Has no Formed Police Units (FPUs) to enforce law and order.
- Relies entirely on military forces to carry out non-military duties, such as humanitarian coordination or dispute mediation.

This configuration limits UNISFA's ability to address root causes of violence, ensure accountability, or provide sustainable protection frameworks. The mission's hands are often tied when perpetrators are identified but cannot be detained or tried due to the absence of legal infrastructure.

5.2 Absence of Civil Administration and Rule of Law Institutions

Abyei is not governed by either Sudan or South Sudan. As a result, there is:

- No local police force or prison system.
- No proper judicial authority to try crimes or resolve legal disputes.
- No civil registry, land administration, or taxation system.
- Limited representation of women or youth in formal governance.

In this vacuum, UNISFA is often the only authority present, but its soldiers are neither trained nor mandated to serve as law enforcers or civil administrators. The lack of civilian governance structures also hampers long – term stabilization efforts and complicates relationships with humanitarian actors, who typically rely on local authorities for access and coordination.

5.3 Political Interference and Security Dilemmas

UNISFA operates in a highly politicized environment, where both Sudan and South Sudan have strategic interests in Abyei but refuse to compromise on its final status. This creates several obstacles:

- Both governments undermine the mission's neutrality by accusing it of bias.
- Sudan at certain point in time refused to grant visas to some international civilian staff, weakening the mission's ability to scale its civilian operations.
- National security services from both states have reportedly infiltrated local communities, hence influenced militia behavior and fueled violence.

These dynamics leave UNISFA in a precarious position. It must balance diplomacy with impartiality while trying to mediate among communities deeply influenced by external actors.

5.4 Access and Mobility Constraints

The Abyei region is geographically challenging:

- Seasonal flooding renders many roads impassable for up to four months a year.
- Limited air assets constrain aerial surveillance and medical evacuation.
- Poor communications infrastructure makes it difficult to coordinate responses in real time.
- Movement is sometimes restricted by national authorities, who require advance clearance for patrols or deployments.

These logistical constraints delay UNISFA's quick reaction capabilities, reduce its presence in remote areas, and limit its ability to maintain a protective posture throughout the region.

5.5 Community Distrust and Perception Biases

While UNISFA has built strong relationships with many communities, trust remains fragile:

- Ngok Dinka accuse UNISFA of failing to prevent attacks by Misseriya militias.
- Misseriya leaders occasionally claim UNISFA sides with the Dinka and prevents their access to grazing routes.
- Misinformation campaigns by local actors or national governments have eroded credibility in both communities.

Without dedicated community engagement officers, linguistic specialists, and cultural liaisons, UNISFA's military centric approach sometimes misses the nuances of inter – communal grievances. This affects the mission's ability to anticipate violence and tailor its protection strategies accordingly.

5.6 Lack of Human Rights and Early Warning Capacity

UNISFA does not have a permanent Human Rights Division, unlike most peacekeeping missions. While a small number of human rights officers are deployed periodically, they lack the capacity to:

- Monitor violations across the full geographic area.
- Investigate reports of gender-based violence and ethnic cleansing.
- Issue public reports or coordinate with international accountability bodies.

Additionally, the mission's early warning systems are rudimentary, relying mostly on community alerts and occasional satellite imagery. Without a dedicated early warning unit, responses are often reactive rather than preventive.

5.6 Coordination Gaps with Civil Society and UN Agencies

While UNISFA collaborates with humanitarian actors, coordination is often ad hoc and hindered by:

- Limited joint planning mechanisms.
- Absence of a comprehensive protection strategy shared by UN actors.
- Disconnect between military priorities and humanitarian imperatives.

Without integrated platforms such as Civil Military Coordination Centers (CMCoord) – opportunities for synergy and resource sharing are lost. This affects the overall coherence and effectiveness of civilian protection efforts in Abyei.

5.8 Gender-Specific Protection Gaps

UNISFA has made strides in engaging women in peace and security, but:

- There are too few female peacekeepers to engage meaningfully with women and girls in all sectors.
- The mission lacks female interpreters and gender analysts.

- Cases of sexual violence are underreported and poorly documented due to cultural taboos and logistical hurdles.

Without robust gender mainstreaming, UNISFA's PoC efforts may not fully address the unique needs of vulnerable groups such as women, children, and the elderly.

6. Best Practices and Lessons Learned

6.1 Community-Centered Protection Strategies

UNISFA has effectively embraced a protection model grounded in community involvement and localized conflict resolution mechanisms.

Key Practices:

- **Joint Community Peace Committees (JCPCs):** These committees function as grassroots peace conflict councils, bringing together Ngok Dinka and Misseriya representatives. They resolve disputes over cattle raids, land use, and seasonal migration through consensus-building.

Note: This approach aligns with traditional dispute resolution customs and builds legitimacy. JCPCs reduce the need for external intervention and improve early warning.

- **Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs):** Often local hires fluent in Dinka and Arabic for easy communication. CLAs accompany patrols, mediate tensions, and collect protection data.

Note: Their linguistic and cultural familiarity increases trust in UNISFA and bridges communication gaps that can otherwise escalate misunderstandings.

- **Mobile Civil-Military Outreach Teams:** These small mobile units engage in community outreach, such as health screenings, public messaging, and quick conflict de-escalation.

Note: These improve civilian perception of the mission and extend reach into underserved areas.

6.2 Conflict-Sensitive Deployment Patterns

UNISFA's force posture reflects an understanding of the sociopolitical and temporal patterns of violence in Abyei.

Key Practices:

- **MOPs in strategic areas:** Military Observation Posts are located near known hotspots like Amiet Market and the Kiir River to deter attacks and protect transit routes.

Note: Their presence reassures civilians and reduces opportunistic violence.

- **Migration Season surge patrols:** These increased deployments coincide with Misseriya seasonal migration, a time of heightened tension with the Ngok Dinka.

Note: Such deployments are proactive and preventive, helping to avoid clashes over grazing rights and water access.

- **Joint patrols with elders:** Encouraging shared security responsibility.

Note: Reduces accusations of bias and fosters shared protection roles and real-time intelligence.

6.3 Integration of Gender Perspectives into Protection

Despite its limited civilian footprint, UNISFA has worked to integrate gender equality principles into field operations.

Key Practices:

- **Female peacekeeper engagement:** Women in uniform patrol markets, schools, and health centers, encouraging the reporting of GBV and increasing women's access to UN services.

Note: Encourages reporting of SGBV and improves perception of safety.

- Women's Peace Committees: These forums empower women as peace advocates, focusing on conflict prevention, trauma healing, and the protection of children.

Note: Empowers women and increases local legitimacy.

- Sensitization campaigns: UNISFA collaborates with traditional leaders to educate communities on the impact of GBV, child marriage, and women's exclusion from dialogue.

Note: Engaging male elders helps shift cultural norms from within rather than imposing external model.

6.4 Flexible Engagement with Humanitarian Actors

UNISFA's operational presence has been critical in supporting humanitarian access and coordination.

Key Practices:

- Corridor escorts and security: Safeguarding aid missions.

Note: Ensures consistent delivery of essential services to remote areas.

- Joint assessments: Aligning protection priorities with civilian needs.

Note: Improves coherence across the UN system.

- Emergency medical support: Life-saving support during crises.

Note: Builds goodwill and increases confidence in UNISFA.

6.5 Lessons for Other Missions

Broader lessons drawn from UNISFA include:

- Community ownership fosters sustainable peace.
- Dialogue prevents violence before it escalates.
- Gender-inclusive strategies are mission-critical.
- Perceived neutrality enhances operational space.
- Flexibility and innovation are essential for impact.

These practices offer a model for other UN missions in similarly complex environments.

7. Recommendations

Drawing from UNISFA's operational realities, legal limitations, and contextual constraints, this section proposes a series of strategic, structural, and policy-level recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of the mission's Protection of Civilians (PoC) mandate. These recommendations are categorized into five key areas: mandate strengthening, institutional support, community engagement, coordination with stakeholders, and long-term peacebuilding.

7.1 Strengthen and Expand the UNISFA Mandate

- The UN Security Council should revise UNISFA's mandate to include civilian components such as a Civil Affairs Section, Human Rights Division, and Gender Unit.

Rationale: These additions will help monitor human rights violations, promote rule of law, and ensure gender-sensitive interventions.

- Deploy a Formed Police Unit (FPU) to supplement military forces and manage public order.

Rationale: Police units are better equipped for crowd control and non-lethal conflict management.

- Mandate support for transitional governance mechanisms under UN oversight.

Rationale: In the absence of state structures, local justice and administrative bodies can fill governance gaps.

7.2 Enhance UNISFA's Institutional Capacity and Resources

- Invest in robust early warning and rapid response systems, including SMS alerts and satellite surveillance.

Rationale: Timely information enhances preventive deployment.

- Expand the number of Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs) with attention to linguistic and sectoral coverage.

Rationale: CLAs are key to community trust and intelligence gathering.

- Increase the number of female peacekeepers and deploy Gender Advisors at mission and sector levels.

Rationale: Gender balance improves mission inclusivity and protection effectiveness.

- Allocate additional air assets for mobility, medevac, and surveillance, especially during floods.

Rationale: Aerial mobility is essential in hard-to-reach zones.

7.3 Deepen Community Engagement and Local Ownership

- Scale up Joint Community Peace Committees (JCPCs) across all sectors.

Rationale: JCPCs have proven effective in mitigating local disputes.

- Create Protection Working Groups composed of elders, youth, women's reps, and UNISFA staff.

Rationale: These platforms enable participatory security planning.

- Launch Peace Education Programs for youth via schools and radio.

Rationale: Educated youth are less likely to be recruited into violence.

- Support Women's Peace Initiatives with training in mediation and trauma recovery.

Rationale: Women's inclusion strengthens peace durability and social cohesion.

7.4 Improve Coordination with Humanitarian and Development Actors

- Establish a Civil-Military Coordination (CMCoord) Unit.

Rationale: Structured coordination enhances mutual trust and operational coherence.

- Develop a Joint Protection Strategy with key UN agencies and NGOs.

Rationale: A unified framework helps align objectives and avoid duplication.

- Conduct regular joint assessments in IDP camps, border zones, and disputed areas.

Rationale: Shared data improves prioritization and accountability.

- Ensure secure and predictable humanitarian corridors.

Rationale: Humanitarian access must be safeguarded under all conditions.

7.5 Promote Long-Term Stability and Peacebuilding

- Support reactivation of the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee (AJOC).

Rationale: This committee is central to resolving the region's final status.

- Promote youth employment and vocational training programs.

Rationale: Economic empowerment reduces violence incentives.

- Advocate for a civilian protection compact endorsed by Sudan, South Sudan, and community leaders.

Rationale: A formal pledge can reinforce norms against targeting civilians.

- Document and share lessons learned through UN channels and academic partnerships.

Rationale: Dissemination contributes to global peacekeeping doctrine and peer learning.

8. Conclusion and Way Forward

The protection of civilians (PoC) in conflict zones remains one of the most critical and challenging responsibilities of United Nations peacekeeping operations. In the case of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), this challenge is magnified by the region's unique geopolitical status,

its contested governance, and its complex socio-ethnic dynamics. Despite significant constraints including a limited mandate, absence of state institutions, and seasonal insecurity, UNISFA has made notable strides in providing security, building trust, and facilitating inter-communal dialogue.

8.1 Synthesis of Key Findings

UNISFA's protection mandate is operationally constrained, yet field implementation has shown innovation and community responsiveness.

Key insights:

- **Mandate Gaps:** Lack of civilian components limits comprehensive PoC implementation.
- **Field Innovation:** Community-based protection mechanisms have reduced violence and enhanced trust.
- **Operational Challenges:** Persistent issues with mobility, interference, and resource gaps.
- **Best Practices:** Flexible deployments, gender-sensitive approaches, and local mediation have been critical.
- **Recommendations:** Expansion of mandate, resources, coordination, and long-term governance is necessary.

8.2 Strategic Outlook for UNISFA

- **Mandate Expansion**
- Inclusion of civilian components (civil affairs, human rights, gender advisors).
- Deployment of formed police units.
- Legal empowerment for traditional justice and governance engagement.
- **Operational Integration**
- Joint protection frameworks with UN agencies.
- Civil-military coordination structures.
- Community-based early warning and response networks.
- **Strategic Transition Planning**
- Support for the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee (AJOC).
- Development of local governance structures.
- Youth and women empowerment for long-term resilience.

8.3 Final Reflections

UNISFA's experience highlights that:

- Protection requires political will, community engagement, and institutional support.
- Military missions can be adaptive when guided by field realities.
- Root causes of violence must be addressed for lasting protection.

UNISFA's future lies in strategic deepening and responsible transition, with a strengthened mandate and durable peacebuilding support.

References

1. African Union. (2015). African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA): Roadmap 2016–2020. Addis Ababa: African Union Commission.
2. United Nations. (2009). Protecting Civilians in the Context of UN Peacekeeping Operations: Successes, Setbacks and Remaining Challenges. United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

3. United Nations Security Council. (2011). Resolution 1990 (2011). S/RES/1990. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1990\(2011\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1990(2011))
4. United Nations. (2020). Policy on Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping. DPKO/DFS/2020.10.
5. Williams, P. D. (2022). Understanding Peacekeeping (3rd ed.). Polity Press.