The End of UNTMIS and the Unfinished Business of State-Building in Somalia

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Summary

» The closure of UNTMIS on 31 October 2026 ended more than three decades of UN political engagement in Somalia. While the transition aimed to transfer responsibilities to Somali institutions and the UN Country Team, it raised questions about the continuity of political facilitation, mediation and other mission functions.

» Successive UN missions supported reconciliation, federalism, state formation, constitutional development, elections, human rights and political transitions. However, Somalia continues to face unresolved disputes over constitutional authority, power-sharing, fiscal federalism, elections and security.

» The National Consultative Council (NCC) facilitated negotiations among federal and state leaders, but its effectiveness has depended on political participation, consensus and implementation. UNTMIS's closure has created a gap in mediation and preventive diplomacy, particularly when Somali leaders struggle to resolve disputes through dialogue.

» The transition also raises concerns about continuity in human rights monitoring, civilian protection and inclusive political participation. Addressing these challenges requires stronger Somali political leadership, capable institutions, credible dialogue mechanisms and coordinated international support.

About Somali Public Agenda

Somali Public Agenda is a nonprofit public policy and administration research organization based in Mogadishu. Its aim is to advance understanding and improvement of public administration and public services in Somalia through evidence-based research and analysis.

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Introduction

On 31 October 2026, the United Nations Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNTMIS) completed its two-year transition and ceased operations, following a request by the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and pursuant to United Nations Security Council resolutions 2753 (2024) and 2809 (2025). The closure ended more than three decades of successive UN political and peacekeeping missions supporting Somalia's peacebuilding, state-building and reconciliation. Under the transition roadmap, UNTMIS's responsibilities were transferred to Somali institutions and UN agencies, funds and programmes (United Nations Security Council, 2024; UNTMIS, 2026).

The mission's departure raises questions about the effectiveness and sustainability of international engagement and the readiness of Somali institutions to assume functions previously supported by the UN. This brief examines the contributions of successive UN missions, the implications of UNTMIS's closure and the limitations of the UN Country Team in assuming the mission's political functions. It also considers the unfinished business of Somalia's state-building process and identifies policy priorities following the mission's departure.

From UNOSOM to UNTMIS: Three Decades of UN Political Engagement

Following the collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991, the UN deployed the United Nations Operation in Somalia I (UNOSOM I) in 1992 and UNOSOM II in 1993 to facilitate humanitarian assistance, restore security and support reconciliation and institution-building. Insecurity, armed resistance and the absence of a viable political settlement undermined these operations, and UNOSOM II withdrew in March 1995. The UN subsequently shifted towards political engagement through the United Nations Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS), established in 1995.

UNPOS supported reconciliation and political processes that contributed to the establishment of the Transitional National Government in Arta, Djibouti, in 2000, the Transitional Federal Government through the IGAD-led process in Mbagathi, Kenya, in 2004, and the Federal Government of Somalia in Mogadishu in 2012. Its successor, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), established in 2013, provided political support for provisional constitution-making, federalisation, elections, reconciliation, human rights, justice and security-sector reform (Yusuf, 2024).

The formation of Federal Member States was also a collective process. Somali political actors, communities, federal authorities and international partners participated in negotiations, reconciliation, state formation and institutional development. The UN supported these processes alongside other partners, including the Somalia Stability Fund, which provided logistical, technical and political support to state formation processes, particularly in Galmudug, Hirshabelle and South West State (Laws, 2018).

Relations between the FGS and UN missions were not always smooth. In January 2019, the FGS declared the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative, Nicholas Haysom, persona non grata following the mission's inquiry into the arrest of Mukhtar Robow, a former Al-Shabaab deputy leader and presidential

candidate in South West State who is now the FGS Minister of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. The episode exposed tensions between the UN's role in political accountability and the government's interpretation of national sovereignty and political independence.

Relations improved after President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud returned to office in May 2022, but tensions resurfaced over constitutional amendments adopted in March 2024. Puntland, Jubaland and opposition leaders rejected amendments to the first four chapters of the Provisional Federal Constitution, arguing that the process did not comply with the amendment procedures set out in Chapter 15 and lacked adequate consultation. On 31 March 2024, the UN Special Representative, Catriona Laing, visited Garowe and offered UNSOM's good offices to support dialogue. Federal officials criticised the visit as interference in domestic affairs. On 5 May 2024, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation formally requested that UNSOM's mandate end by October 2024. Following consultations, the FGS and mission leadership agreed on a phased, two-year transition. The Security Council established UNTMIS through Resolution 2753 (2024), and its mandate concluded on 31 October 2026 (Yusuf, 2024; United Nations Security Council, 2024; UNTMIS, 2026).

The UN Mission as Political Scaffolding

UN political missions can be likened to scaffolding supporting a building under construction. Scaffolding provides temporary support, access and stability while construction progresses, but it is not the building itself. In Somalia, successive UN missions provided political and institutional support to Somali-led processes, including reconciliation, federalism, constitutional development, elections and international coordination. Their good offices offered channels for mediation and confidence-building when domestic actors struggled to reach agreement. They also provided technical advice, political reporting, early warning and capacity development (Yusuf, 2024).

The analogy also highlights the limits of international support. Scaffolding can facilitate construction, but it cannot replace the builders or determine whether the building is structurally sound. Similarly, the UN could advise, facilitate and support, but it could not substitute for Somali political leadership, institutional responsibility or the implementation of political agreements.

The distinction between withdrawing support and transferring functions is therefore important. A phased transition could have integrated the mission's responsibilities, expertise and resources into national institutions as their capacity developed. Although UNTMIS underwent a two-year transition, the transfer did not establish an equivalent national mechanism for discreet diplomacy, preventive mediation and dialogue among competing political actors. The gap was therefore not simply the result of the mission's closure, but also the limited preparedness, authority, resources and perceived neutrality of institutions expected to assume some of its functions.

The National Consultative Council: Political Facilitation and Its Limits

The National Consultative Council (NCC) illustrates both the value and limitations of Somali-led political facilitation. The NCC became a platform for federal and state leaders to discuss national priorities and negotiate contentious issues. Its discussions addressed constitutional review, security arrangements, elections, power-sharing and relations between federal and state governments.

The NCC facilitated agreements on several important issues, including the national security architecture, the allocation of powers, the judicial model, and fiscal federalism. It also demonstrated that Somali leaders could negotiate political settlements when sufficient political commitment existed. However, participation was not always inclusive, agreements did not always command consensus among all relevant actors, and implementation remained uneven. Puntland's absence from NCC agreements further illustrated the difficulty of reaching broad political agreement on Somalia's federal arrangements (Somali Public Agenda, 2023; United Nations, 2023).

The NCC therefore cannot be viewed as an automatic replacement for UN political facilitation. Its effectiveness depends on participation, political trust, compromise and follow-through. When political deadlock and personal rivalries prevail, additional mediation or facilitation may be needed. Neither the C6+ group nor the Quartet—comprising the United States, the United Kingdom, Türkiye and the European Union—has the mandate, institutional structure or sustained political presence to fully replicate the political facilitation provided by a dedicated UN mission.

The transition also exposed weaknesses in national ownership and preparedness. The FGS established a team involving the Offices of the President and Prime Minister, the Office of National Security and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, the process did not receive the sustained attention needed to ensure that transferred responsibilities were understood, resourced and integrated into government operations. It risked becoming an administrative handover rather than a substantive transfer of capacity, expertise and resources.

The Secretary-General's final transition report identified revised electoral timelines, declining international funding and reduced capacity among UN Country Team entities designated to inherit responsibilities. These constraints raise questions about whether administrative completion was matched by operational readiness (United Nations Secretary-General, 2026).

Three Decades of Engagement: Achievements and Unfinished Business

Three decades of UN engagement helped Somalia move from state collapse towards internationally recognised federal institutions. The country established Federal Member States, adopted a provisional constitutional framework and experienced successive political transitions. UN missions contributed to mediation, strategic advice, institutional continuity, human rights monitoring and international coordination. However, these achievements resulted from collective efforts involving Somali political actors, civil society and multiple international partners (Yusuf, 2024).

Somalia also made progress in women's political representation, although it remained below agreed targets. Women's representation in the House of the People increased from approximately 14 per cent in 2012 to 24 per cent in 2016,

before declining to around 20 per cent in 2022. These figures reflect both the advocacy of Somali women and civil society and the support provided by international partners, including the UN (United Nations, 2022). Continued support for women's political participation remains important following the mission's closure.

Yet a persistent gap remains between establishing institutions and making them functional, legitimate and accountable. Constitutional authority, judicial independence, political patronage, domestic revenue, corruption and inadequate public service delivery remain major challenges. Power-sharing, fiscal federalism, security responsibilities and electoral legitimacy are also contested.

Somalia's political leadership bears primary responsibility for these shortcomings. Successive governments have often prioritised elite bargaining and control over institutions rather than durable constitutional arrangements and accountable administration. Electoral disputes and extensions of political mandates have weakened public confidence. International assistance cannot substitute indefinitely for domestic commitment to reform.

International partners must also assess their record. Despite extensive diplomatic engagement and financial assistance, successive missions had limited success in addressing corruption, disputed electoral processes and political exclusion. Reliance on host-government cooperation sometimes constrained their ability to challenge developments that undermined inclusive governance.

The unresolved Somalia–Somaliland question further illustrates the limits of international engagement. The UN did not establish a sustained mediation framework capable of narrowing the fundamental disagreements between Mogadishu and Hargeisa. Although responsibility rests primarily with the parties, more consistent technical mediation and confidence-building support could have been pursued.

The security record is also concerning. Despite Somali and international military operations, Al-Shabaab continues to exploit governance vacuums, political fragmentation, local grievances and weak security institutions. UN political missions were not mandated to command counterinsurgency operations, but support for stabilisation, reconciliation and security-sector reform did not overcome the disconnect between military gains and sustainable governance.

Weak domestic revenue, donor dependence and declining humanitarian and development assistance have further compounded institutional fragility. Public frustration risks deepening distrust and instability, while Al-Shabaab exploits grievances and operates parallel taxation, legal and dispute-resolution systems. The Secretary-General's final report documented continuing electoral and constitutional tensions, disagreements involving Federal Member States and armed clashes shortly before UNTMIS's closure (United Nations Secretary-General, 2026). The mission therefore departed while major political and security challenges remained unresolved.

The central question is why successive governments and international partners invested so heavily in institutional structures without securing the political settlements, accountability and public legitimacy needed to sustain them.

Why the UN Country Team Cannot Replace a Special Political Mission

A major misconception surrounding UNTMIS's closure is that the UN Country Team (UNCT) can automatically replace a Security Council-mandated Special Political Mission. The UNCT comprises UN agencies, funds and programmes coordinated through the Resident Coordinator's Office. It provides humanitarian assistance, development support, governance assistance and institutional capacity development. Its mandates, however, differ fundamentally from those of a Special Political Mission.

Special Political Missions provide good offices, preventive diplomacy, mediation, political analysis and engagement with competing national actors. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General leads the mission on behalf of the Secretary-General and briefs the Security Council on its mandate. By contrast, the Resident Coordinator coordinates UN development activities, while the Humanitarian Coordinator leads humanitarian coordination. Neither automatically inherits the Special Representative's political mandate.

The UNCT can continue to provide technical support for constitutional reform, elections, human rights, justice, reconciliation and institutional development. However, transferring programmes does not transfer political authority, mediation capacity or institutional influence. UN agencies were already managing substantial responsibilities with limited resources, constraining their ability to absorb additional functions without further support.

At UNTMIS's closure, Somalia faced contested political mandates, constitutional disagreements, delayed elections, federal–state tensions and continuing Al-Shabaab attacks. Regional rivalries involving Somaliland, Ethiopia, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden further complicated the political environment. The UNCT can contribute through technical assistance and development programmes, but it lacks the mandate and political instruments of a dedicated Special Political Mission. Its continued presence should not be mistaken for continuity in UNTMIS's political and diplomatic functions.

Beyond the UN Transition: The Imperative of Somali Political Leadership

UNTMIS's closure is both a milestone in Somalia's pursuit of national ownership and a test of institutional readiness. Three decades of UN assistance helped rebuild political institutions and sustain international engagement, but did not resolve fundamental challenges of legitimacy, constitutional uncertainty, insecurity, corruption and institutional fragility.

A more prudent approach would have phased out the mission's functions while integrating its expertise and responsibilities into relevant Somali institutions, including the Office of National Security, the National Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission, the National Human Rights Commission, the National Reconciliation Commission and the Ministry of Interior, Federal Affairs and Reconciliation. Such a process could have strengthened national ownership while preserving capacities for mediation, threat assessment, electoral support, human rights monitoring, federalism and conflict prevention.

The immediate priorities should be to establish a credible and inclusive mechanism for political dialogue, agree on a political roadmap for resolving constitutional and electoral disputes, and ensure that institutions responsible for human rights monitoring and political coordination have the authority and resources to function. Progress should be measured through implementation of political agreements, institutional performance, sustained dialogue and accountability—not simply through the transfer of responsibilities.

Ultimately, responsibility for Somalia's future rests with Somalis and their leaders. International missions can support institutions, facilitate agreements and provide expertise, but they cannot manufacture political consensus, accountability or public legitimacy.

Policy Considerations

1. **Strengthen and use an inclusive political dialogue mechanism.** Federal and state leaders, together with opposition stakeholders, should agree on who can credibly convene political talks, which disputes should be prioritised and how agreements will be implemented. Rather than creating another institution without political consensus, Somali stakeholders should consider strengthening or adapting existing mechanisms where they have legitimacy. International partners can provide facilitation and technical support at the request of Somali stakeholders.
2. **Prioritise agreements on constitutional authority, elections and revenue-sharing.** Political dialogue should focus first on the most consequential disputes affecting federal relations and political stability, including constitutional authority, the electoral framework, the division of powers and revenue-sharing arrangements. An agreed political roadmap, clear timelines and a mechanism for resolving disputes would help make dialogue more concrete and prevent agreements from remaining declaratory.
3. **Ensure continuity of institutional functions transferred from UNTMIS. The** FGS should assess which functions were transferred, which institutions are responsible and what gaps remain in authority, expertise, staffing and funding. Priority should be given to political coordination and mediation, human rights monitoring and reporting, civilian harm documentation, electoral support and conflict prevention. Progress should be assessed against measurable indicators, including the regularity of monitoring, publication of reports, follow-up to findings and the capacity to engage in political disputes.
4. **Coordinate international support around Somali-led priorities.** The UN, African Union, European Union, IGAD and bilateral partners should establish a coordinated approach to supporting political dialogue and institutional capacity after UNTMIS. Somali stakeholders should have a clear channel to request assistance with political talks, mediation and conflict prevention. Support should complement national processes, avoid competing initiatives and reinforce accountability and inclusive political participation.

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