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Summary

On 5 May 2024, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) dispatched an official letter to the United Nations Secretary-General asking for the closure of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), which has been in operation for 11 years. This governance brief analyses the FGS's apparently 'surprising' demand to liquidate the special political mission, UNSOM. In so doing, it lays out brief context to the introduction of UNSOM in Somalia and proceeds to sketch out its role in Somalia's political settlement landscape. Further, the governance brief discusses the FGS' explanation of its demand; and provides a snapshot of the reactions of opposition politicians and the wider implications of closing the UNSOM office. The brief concludes with recommendations for the concerned stakeholders, highlighting how important it is that the FGS speak openly to the public about why it wants the mission to end. The FGS should also publicly address concerns raised by politicians over this request and its underlying motives.

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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Analysis of the Federal Government's push to end the UN's Special Political Mission in Somalia (UNSOM)

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Introduction:

The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation on Monday, 5 May 2023, sent a strongly-worded letter to the United Nations (UN) Security Council and its Secretary General asking to "swiftly" wind down the 11-year-old United Nations Assistance Mission (UNSOM) in Somalia, clearly stating that the FGS is no longer in favor of the renewal of the mandate of the mission. The news of the letter first appeared and circulated virally on social media, which took many Somalis (and members of the international community) by surprise. It became the dominant issue in online and offline discussions in Somalia. Four days later, on 9 May, the FGS issued a less assertive and soft-toned letter calling for transition plans to the United Nations country team to be worked out by both FGS and the UN, instead of the outright and abrupt closure the mission. On this occasion, the government recognized the need for enough time to engage with the relevant stakeholders within the UN and prepare for this transition.

The FGS' push to end the UNSOM mandate comes on the back of lifting the 30-year-old arms embargo on 31st December 2023 by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC); Somalia's reaching of the completion point of the debt relief process and the \$4.5 billion debt forgiveness from Somalia on 13th December 2023; and Somalia's formal accession to East Africa Community on 4th March 2024. These three developments were hailed as historic milestones for Somalia's state-building process and Somalia's reputation on the global stage.

Against this backdrop, this governance brief analyses FGS's request to conclude the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM). It gives brief context to UNSOM; looks at its role in the political settlement; presents the political elite's skepticism about the FGS's call to end the mission; and explains FGS's possible motivation(s)/interpretation(s) to get the mission terminated. It recommends that FGS speak to the public about why it wants the mission to end. It should also answer concerns raised by politicians over this request to close down the mission. The brief draws on an off-the-record forum held at the SPA office on 21 May 2023 with a senior FGS technocrat discussing this matter, as well as secondary sources.

UNSOM in context

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia, known by its acronym UNSOM, was established on 3 June 2013 following the unanimously adopted United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 2102 (2013) (United Nations, 2013). It came after Somalia formed its first permanent government – a federal government – in 2012 after more than 20 years of warlord-controlled fiefdoms and weak transitional governments. The core priorities of the FGS that came to power in 2012 were to form federal member states, improve security, and finalize the provisional federal constitution. At that time, the country was embroiled in a difficult security situation with the FGS corralled in Villa Somalia and barely in control of Mogadishu, the capital city.

The UN special political mission was mandated for the pursuit of its establishing resolution to work with the Federal Government of Somalia and Federal Member States (FMSs) to support national reconciliation, provide strategic and policy advice on various aspects of peacebuilding and state-building, to monitor human rights, and help coordinate the efforts of the international community (UN Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, 2013). The mission has operated with a yearly mandate, and

has been annually renewed after the Security Council's assessment of the situation in the country. It has been led by the Representative to Secretary-General (SRSG) for Somalia (appointed by the UN Secretary General).

However, the relationship between UNSOM and FGS administrations has been uneasy at times, leading to the tenure of two previous SRSGs – Nicholas Haysom & Catriona Laing – being cut short during the Farmajo Administration and under current government of Hassan Sheikh.

Before the introduction of the special political mission, UNSOM, the UN had not been cut off from Somalia's affairs but had maintained its engagement through successive SRSGs since April 1992, just a year after Somalia's descent into total state collapse and further chaotic violence.

Somalia is not the only country to host a UN special political mission on its soil. The presence of a UN political mission is a characteristic feature Somalia shares with an array of countries affected by virulent conflicts, which have included Afghanistan, Iraq, Colombia, Nepal, South Sudan, Yemen, Sudan, Libya, and others where political missions were deployed to support dialogue, reconciliation processes, facilitate free and fair elections, monitor human rights, among others. The UN has active political missions in countries such as Libya, Lebanon, Iraq, Colombia, Haiti, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, and Cyprus

UNSOM's role in Somalia's political settlement

The core of UNSOM's mission boils down to the development and maintenance of a political settlement for Somalia. A fledgling federal system was cobbled together around the start of its mission, with the help of the international community. The need for a comprehensive political settlement in Somalia remains undiminished as this task remains unfinished. This need stands alongside other urgent priorities such as security provision, humanitarian responses, and the promotion of human rights. These are persistent challenges that Somalia struggles with and for which the mission was mandated to work on.

Political settlement is the most visible aspect of the mission's mandate, at least in terms of the public's perception. It has contributed to this priority area in various ways. Although this governance brief cannot be exhaustive here it aims to highlight a few instances of UNSOM's involvement in political settlement work to inform the discussions on the future of its mission.

The inauguration of the mission, in June 2013, came at a time when the FGS was at an early stage in the formation of federal member states (FMSs). UNSOM supported these processes. It played a role in the establishment of the Jubaland interim administration in 2013 by providing support to the technical committee drafting the state constitution (UNDP, 2015). UNSOM also launched efforts to resolve the dispute over state formation between the FGS and the Jubaland interim administration, which emerged in the process led by the incumbent president of the state, Ahmed Mohamed Islam "Madobe". Likewise, UNSOM was involved in the formation of other emerging FMSs by providing strategic advice and suitable offices to the stakeholders in these processes (UNSOM, 2015). The mission has been undertaking shuttle diplomacy to narrow down differences between the key stakeholders – particularly FGS and FMSs leaders – over key contentious political issues at particular moments in order to reach a consensus on these issues to move forward.

Further, the UNSOM mission has been offering good offices to the FGS leadership and FMSs that have, at times, been at loggerheads on key national political issues. Different SRSGs who headed the mission often shuttled between FMSs capitals and Mogadishu to urge leaders to settle their disputes through dialogue and consensus. Similarly, UNSOM has been a useful recourse for opposition

politicians at federal and state levels when they have found that incumbent politicians – primarily the federal government – evade and/or prevaricate in engaging with all political stakeholders on critical national political matters such as elections. UNSOM has also played an advocacy role for women's representation in the parliament particularly in the 2016 indirect elections where women were designated seats that only women could compete for. Although a higher target was not met, this ultimately increased women's representation in the parliament from 14% to 24%.

The UN political mission was also instrumental in midwiving the high-stakes election in 2021-2022. Along with Western embassies and partners in Mogadishu, UNSOM mounted pressure on the FGS and FMSs leaders to reach a compromise on the election model after they failed to make this in the National Consultative Council (NCC) meetings in Dhusamareb. FGS and FMS leaders subsequently agreed on an electoral agreement on 17 September 2020, which was approved by both houses of the federal parliament and endorsed by political actors.

While this temporarily cooled down the high political temperatures, the FGS reneged on the agreement after the House of the People of the federal parliament passed controversial legislation on 12 April 2021 extending the term of the incumbent president for two years to allegedly prepare for direct elections (Kahiye, 2021). This new development escalated the already delicate political situation into violence between the FGS forces and forces loyal to the opposition politicians in Mogadishu on 26 April 2021 (Aljazeera, 2021).

Faced with stiff local opposition and pressure from the UNSOM-coordinated international partners who took a firm position on "no partial elections, no parallel processes, and no unilateral actions", the FGS president was forced to strike down the legislation through parliament on 1 May 2021. This was ultimately followed by the 27 May agreement on elections that paved the way for indirect elections (Hassan, 2021).

The UNSOM's role in Somalia's political settlement is often seen to be that of an arbiter in an otherwise no-holds-barred political environment at both state and federal levels under which winner-takes-all behavior characteristically prevails. Thus, this mission – in coordination with other partners such as embassies and through its authorizations from the UN Security Council – has been able to impress upon Somali politicians the importance of (relatively) consensus-based agreements to manage transitions that have prevented the country from falling off the precipice into mass political violence. The mission has also supported instruments of the political settlement, such as a review of the provisional constitution and electoral, boundary, and federal commissions, which are bedrock institutions for stable political transitions and agreements.

FGS's reasoning for terminating the mission

The FGS has framed its demand to end the UN's political mission with quite a positive narrative. According to insights we gleaned from an off-the-record discussion hosted at Somali Public Agenda, this bid primarily aims to burnish the image and promote the standing of Somalia on the international stage. The decision follows the cascading recent FGS accomplishments regarding arms embargo lifting, securing debt relief, and joining the East Africa Community (EAC).

On the other hand, FGS denies that this is a short-term, self-serving and politically motivated scheme. It argues that the presence of the UNSC-authorized mission in the country presents an unfavorable perception to the world community about Somalia, and this limits bilateral engagements between Somalia and other UN member states. With a UN special political mission in the country, FGS further contends, the international community will be hesitant to make deals with the Somali government that could otherwise result in much-needed benefits for Somalia. The government is anxious

that other states won't dare provide/sell weaponry necessary for rebuilding its army while there remains a political mission briefing the UNSC on the situation in the country.

However, this reasoning is somewhat unpalatable as FGS already signed a strategic bilateral defense agreement with (primarily) Türkiye, which both houses of the federal parliament approved in a joint session on 21 February 2024 in a frantic manner and without any deliberation of the content and implications. Further, the lifting of the arms embargo already enables arms companies to sell weapons to Somalia.

In this context, FGS strives to convince the UNSC not to further renew the mandate of the special political mission and transition support to the UN country team whose role will be limited to development and will have no say in internal political affairs.

To this end, the FGS and the UN Secretary-General agreed to establish a 10-member technical team to work on the transition. This transition is expected to continue for between one year and one and a half years from the time of writing. The FGS seems confident that it will succeed in its pursuit to get the mission ended by January 2026 at the latest, counting on the backing of UNSC veto holding members.

This all comes despite a report on the strategic review of UNSOM in 2022 by a UN Secretary-General appointed team led by Mr Ian Martin, former SRSG for Libya. This team engaged and consulted with diverse Somali stakeholders, including FGS and FMSs (UN Security Council, 2022). The UNSOM strategic review report recommended the need for the continued presence of the special political mission in Somalia, and drew on the views provided by FMS leaders and other stakeholders on the need for UNSOM contribution to areas of its mandate. The conditions that led many stakeholders to say 'yes' to the continuity of the UN special political mission are still present, and it remains uncertain how and if FGS could win the support of these relevant actors to realize its agenda.

FGS is not the first government to demand the shutting down of the UN's special political mission in a country recuperating from conflict or enveloped by conflict. For instance, the war-racked Sudan demanded the UNSC to abruptly end its political mission, the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) – established on June 2020 by UNSC Resolution 2524. The UNSC voted to end this mission in December 2023 (Aljazeera, 2023), after Sudanese army chief, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, accused it intervening in the internal affairs. Similarly, Iraq asked the UN to end the 20-year-old United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) by the end of 2025 but the UNSC set the end of 2026 as the deadline for the departure of the political mission (Banjo, 2024).

Though the decision to dissolve the political mission or not is subject to negotiations between the UN and FGS, acquiescing to FGS's demand would have symbolic rather than substantive implications for Somalia. The FGS's demand to liquidate the political mission resonates with many disillusioned Somali citizens (who are influenced or misled by the populist rhetoric of certain leaders) that this will allow the Somali government to take full control over its sovereignty. On the contrary, the practical issues that, undeniably, undercut Somalia's capacity to regain and exercise its de facto sovereignty originate from within and are perpetuated by diverse Somali actors – not simply external forces that can be easily scapegoated. For many, if successful, the closure of the UNSOM office would be of big symbolic value but little real impact. On the other hand, assessing the decade-long contribution of UNSOM to Somalia's political settlement and reforming its mandate going forward could be equally important.

Elite apprehensions

The news of the FGS's demand to the UN to not renew the UNSOM mandate beyond the expiry of its mandate on 30 October 2024 was not received well by the opposition politicians. These even included notable figures from the previous Farmaajo administration, which portrayed itself as an ironclad 'nationalist and sovereigntist' force that clearly expressed its antagonism to the political mission during their time in office. Some of these same figures now joined forces with other opposition politicians in opposing and sounding the alarm bells about the FGS' push to dissolve the mission.

Though not concerted and coordinated, their talking points were similar as they pointed out practical issues on the ground that they argue will discredit the FGS's call to have Somalia without a UNSC-mandated political mission. However, there are publicly undisclosed, though alluded to, concerns and consternation over the alleged real calculations of the FGS leaders in this endeavor.

Politicians who made their positions public through local media interviews and posts on social media platforms expressed that the timing in which FGS put forward its demand was not propitious. This is due to various factors: political polarization between the FGS and Puntland currently runs high and remains unresolved; the security situation of the country continues to be "precarious" as the FGS has neither defeated nor significantly degraded al-Shabaab; also, there is current opposition to the amended first four chapters of the provisional constitution by both houses of federal parliament, and a subsequent chapters will be deliberated and approved in the coming months according to the calendar of the Independent Constitutional Review and Implementation Commission (ICRIC). Further, politicians cite ambiguity surrounding the electoral model of the FMSs and federal elections. Although the FGS president has made repeatedly unflinching speeches about abandoning the indirect process, the current lack of the necessary substantive infrastructure for such ambitious elections raises questions about the feasibility of one-person-one-vote polls.

With these circumstances present on the ground, politicians link the FGS's demand to terminate the political mission – which has been called on to intervene in these sensitive situations and put pressure on the incumbents – to the 2026 electoral calculus. This view narrows down the ultimate goal of the FGS to close the UNSOM office to its desire to design and stack the electoral processes in its favor. Opponents of this contend that the UNSOM mission can stop the excesses of the incumbents due to its entrusted role to bring the developments in the country to the attention of the UNSC to take necessary measures to address such arising issues. Nonetheless, other voices related the FGS's demand to its successful efforts to secure a non-permanent seat at the UNSC, even though securing this seat doesn't mean that a political mission is unnecessary per se.

Despite assumptions and concerns over the request to end the mission, a senior FGS technocrat who is privy to the matter (and spoke at a recent SPA-hosted non-attribution discussion with a select group of intellectuals) dismissed the aforementioned interpretations. He stated that they only heard of the alleged connections between FGS's letter to the UN Secretary-General and both the 2026 elections and the bid for UNSC seat, from the reactions from the politicians and other actors. He hinted that FGS's bid for the UNSC seat and the presence of a UNSC-mandated political mission in Somalia don't contradict each other or make Somalia's case a non-starter.

To steer clear of uncertainty surrounding this, the FGS, according to the source, consulted with a UNSC veto-wielding member and which informed them that having a political mission on its soil would not derail FGS's bid for a seat. This seat was indeed won on 6 June 2024.

The way forward

The FGS jostles to persuade the UN Secretary-General and UNSC members that it is now time to close down the decade-old special political mission and transition to the UN country team to help bring Somalia back into the international fora and change the negative perceptions that other nations hold about Somalia. This is not an easy task and is one that requires serious work and sensible and capable leadership. The following recommendations are designed to contribute to this effort:

- The FGS should break its silence on this significant matter. It should explain to the public, and engage with the relevant actors about why the government wants to have this mission ended, the benefits and opportunities that Somalia as a country could derive, rather than the short-sighted and self-serving opportunities that incumbents may fantasize about accruing. The reticence of the FGS leadership on the matter could be interpreted that the government doesn't have substantive arguments that make its case warranted and is hiding something from the public. This consequently plays into the hands of the opposition politicians and others who oppose this for good or bad reasons.
- Related to this engagement, the FGS should address the worries of some actors about negative consequences that may result from the UN conceding to the FGS demand. Further, it needs to rally the support of as many stakeholders – opposition politicians, FMSs leaders, civil society across the country – as possible around this case if it wants to demonstrate to the UN that this is a locally supported desire.
- The FGS should seriously and prudently grapple with and improve the outstanding political settlement issue across the country, which could outweigh other benchmarks in assessing Somalia's case for ceasing the special political mission in the country. The FGS needs to settle its dispute with the Puntland State of Somalia and bring it back to the National Consultative Council (NCC); oversee credible elections at FMSs; engage with the political actors on key contentious issues in the constitutional review process and not handle these unilaterally.
- Opposition politicians should scrutinise the government and press it to share information on issues of great significance to the national interest and guard against policies and/or secret dealings that would disadvantage Somalia for generations. However, they should not oppose every incumbent initiative that may benefit the general public for the sake of political opposition. They must behave responsibly and stand with the incumbent government at the time when it obviously engages in an issue for the good of the national interest. The incessant trivial politics of a ruinous zero-sum game will ultimately benefit no one in the short or long term.
- Until the status of the political mission is fully determined, the political mission and its leadership should be sensitive, vigilant, and cautious of every measure(s), behavior(s), and posturing that could be interpreted and/or perceived as an act of meddling in Somalia's internal politics or lording over political leadership, particularly FGS. This could undermine the collaboration between the two sides and further cause friction. It should not bypass the FGS in its engagement with the federal member states but rather inform it to avoid being seen as a force that deepens political divisions. Further, it should help FGS

protect its sovereignty from malign interventions that derail the progress that it has made. It must engage the support of the wider international community by drawing the attention of the security council to the forces, regional or beyond, that are involved in destabilizing the security and peace of the country. Equally, it should empower the national staff at the mission to play critical roles in realizing its mandate. If the existing nationals don't fit critical roles, the mission can recruit qualified, capable, professional, and non-partisan Somali nationals who are well-conversed with the political, security, and social context and dynamics of the country from the diaspora or the local.

- The international partners, including the UN, that have invested – and continue to invest – significant resources in Somalia's state-building, should apply real pressure on Somali politicians at both state and federal levels to work seriously towards resolving key contentious political settlement issues that have considerable political, security, social and economic implications on the country. The international partners of Somalia should not leave the Somali politicians themselves alone to sort out their problems but they should demand that incumbent politicians at both levels reach compromises on key political settlement issues, leveraging the multilateral and unilateral support they offer to Somalia. This is because Somali politicians betrayed to the public long ago that they are not interested in governance that delivers to the (best) interests of the nation but are rather ambivalent and frequently indulge in relentless bickering to advance their narrow self-serving interests.

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