

## UN EFFORTS IN RESOLVING THE ABYEI CONFLICT BETWEEN SUDAN AND SOUTH SUDAN

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**Abstract:** The conflict in the Abyei region between Sudan and South Sudan is a protracted issue driven by historical, ethnic, and resource-based factors. This study investigates the role of the United Nations in addressing the Abyei conflict, with a focus on the peacekeeping missions of UNISFA, UNMIS, and UNMISS. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study analyzes data related to the peace efforts and their impact on the region. The research utilizes the conflict resolution framework to explore how the United Nations has contributed to managing and mitigating the conflict between Sudan and South Sudan, particularly in Abyei. The findings highlight the importance of the UN's involvement in facilitating dialogue, supporting peace negotiations, and conducting peacekeeping operations. The study concludes that while significant progress has been made, the success of peacebuilding efforts in Abyei hinges on continued cooperation between the Sudanese and South Sudanese governments, with sustained support from international organizations. Achieving lasting peace in Abyei requires collaborative efforts and a comprehensive approach to conflict resolution.

**Keywords:** Abyei Conflict, Sudan, South Sudan, UN peacekeeping mission

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### INTRODUCTION

The Abyei region, located at the border between Sudan and South Sudan, has long been the subject of a contentious territorial dispute. This conflict has been one of the most complex and enduring issues in the broader context of post-colonial African geopolitics. The region holds substantial strategic and economic significance, making it a critical focal point in the Sudan-South Sudan relations. Since South Sudan gained independence in 2011, the dispute over Abyei has persisted as a source of tension between the two nations, as well as a point of interest for international stakeholders involved in peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts. The complexity of the Abyei conflict lies not only in the claims of land ownership and resource control but also in the intricate ethnic, political, and legal dynamics that underpin the dispute.

Scholars such as Alterif and Abdelrakhim (2022) have highlighted the international nature of the Abyei dispute, discussing the territorial claims from both Sudan and South

Sudan, alongside the role of international arbitration mechanisms in attempting to resolve the conflict. They argue that the dispute over Abyei cannot be understood without recognizing the broader implications for Sudanese and South Sudanese statehood and sovereignty, as well as the international attention the issue has garnered in the post-independence period (Alterif & Abdelrakhim, 2022). Similarly, Dabala and Lencho (2020) have emphasized the multifaceted challenges faced in achieving a sustainable and peaceful resolution to the Abyei dispute. Their analysis stresses that the situation is compounded by entrenched political, economic, and ethnic divisions within both Sudan and South Sudan, further complicating any efforts for peace negotiations (Dabala & Lencho, 2020).

The legal aspects of the Abyei conflict have also been a key point of academic inquiry. Gunawan (2024) explores the legal dimensions of the dispute, focusing on the protection of civilian rights under international law, as well as the role of United Nations peacekeeping efforts in maintaining stability in the region. He argues that the legal framework surrounding the Abyei conflict is crucial to understanding the legitimacy of territorial claims and the enforcement of international peace agreements, particularly in relation to the rights of the local populations (Gunawan, 2024). In this regard, the involvement of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has been a pivotal development in the region's security architecture. Zambakari et al. (2018) have examined the operational dynamics of UNMISS, emphasizing its role in civilian protection and the difficulties faced in executing peacekeeping operations, particularly in volatile and conflict-prone regions like Abyei. Their findings underscore the importance of effective peacekeeping in ensuring the safety of civilians amid political instability (Zambakari et al., 2018).

In addition to the formal peacekeeping initiatives led by international organizations, the role of local peacekeepers has also been an area of interest. Rahman et al. (2022) provide an important perspective on the function of nonviolent peacekeepers, who have been instrumental in stabilizing local communities and fostering reconciliation in conflict zones such as Abyei. Their work highlights the complementary relationship between international and grassroots peacekeeping efforts, advocating for a more inclusive and collaborative approach to peacebuilding (Rahman et al., 2022). Moreover, Agensky (2018) expands on the broader peacebuilding context in South Sudan, addressing the intersections of religion, governance, and the UN's role in addressing the Abyei conflict. He suggests that the resolution of the Abyei dispute cannot be achieved solely through political and military means, but must also consider social and cultural dimensions, including the role of religion and local governance structures in peacebuilding efforts (Agensky, 2018).

The challenges faced by peacekeepers in conflict zones like Abyei are not unique but are shared by similar international peacekeeping missions across the globe. Sikimić and

Vujanović (2023) provide a comparative analysis of peacekeeping operations in different conflict areas, including those in Africa, offering insights into the challenges posed by logistical constraints, political resistance, and the protection of vulnerable populations. Their findings provide valuable lessons for understanding the complexities of peacekeeping in Abyei, particularly in light of the continuing volatility in the region (Sikimić & Vujanović, 2023). Lumumba (2024) further contributes to this body of knowledge by examining the role of multilateral institutions, including the United Nations, in managing regional conflicts. His research stresses the importance of coordination between various international actors, multilateral institutions, and local stakeholders in mitigating the effects of conflict in regions like Abyei Lumumba, 2024. The environmental dimensions of the Abyei conflict also warrant critical consideration. Lee and Kim (2020) present a methodology for mapping and analyzing environmental conflicts, which offers a useful framework for understanding the environmental impact of the Abyei dispute. Their work suggests that environmental degradation, resource competition, and the socio-political consequences of environmental changes play a significant role in exacerbating territorial conflicts like the one in Abyei. They call for the integration of environmental considerations into peacebuilding and conflict resolution strategies, particularly in regions where resource access is a critical factor in the dispute (Lee & Kim, 2020).

In conclusion, the Abyei conflict requires a multifaceted approach to conflict resolution, one that integrates legal, political, social, environmental, and humanitarian dimensions. The complexity of the situation demands comprehensive and collaborative efforts, involving both international institutions and local actors, to address the underlying issues and achieve lasting peace. The studies mentioned above contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the Abyei dispute, offering valuable insights into the various challenges and potential pathways to conflict resolution.

## METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design, aiming to explore and interpret the complex social, political, and humanitarian issues surrounding the role of the United Nations (UN) in resolving the Abyei regional conflict between Sudan and South Sudan. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for examining multifaceted phenomena where numerical data cannot fully capture the underlying dynamics and experiences of those involved. As Creswell (2014) argues, qualitative research allows for a deeper understanding of social problems by exploring the meanings and experiences attributed to them by participants. The primary objective of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of how the UN's efforts have impacted the peace process in Abyei. Data collection for this study was conducted through three main methods: semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field observations. Semi-structured interviews were

held with key stakeholders, including UN personnel, government representatives from Sudan and South Sudan, and local community leaders. These interviews were designed to capture the participants' personal experiences and perspectives on the ongoing peace efforts. In addition, relevant documents such as UN reports, peace agreements, and official statements were analyzed to provide historical and contextual data on the conflict and its resolution. Field observations were conducted in conflict-affected areas to better understand the environmental and social conditions that shape the peace process. The data collected through these methods were then subjected to thematic analysis, a process involving the coding of transcripts, documents, and field notes to identify recurring themes and patterns. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to uncover key issues such as the effectiveness of the UN's interventions, challenges in diplomatic negotiations, and the role of local communities in peacebuilding. Triangulation was employed to ensure the validity of the findings by cross-referencing data from multiple sources. The research procedure unfolded in a logical sequence: first, the problem and objectives were identified; then data collection was carried out through interviews, documents, and field observations; next, the data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically; and finally, the findings were interpreted and reported. The research followed a clear ethical framework, ensuring informed consent from all participants, guaranteeing their confidentiality, and upholding their rights to withdraw from the study at any time. These ethical measures were implemented to ensure the integrity of the study and the protection of participant privacy. Overall, the qualitative approach provided valuable insights into the dynamics of the Abyei conflict and the role of international peacekeeping, offering a comprehensive understanding of the UN's contributions to the peace process.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### **The Role and Efforts of the United Nations in Addressing the Abyei Conflict:**

The Abyei region, located along the border between Sudan and South Sudan, has long been a point of contention between the two nations. This dispute is rooted in complex historical, ethnic, and geopolitical factors that make it one of the most persistent and volatile conflicts in the African continent. The role of the United Nations (UN), particularly through its peacekeeping and mediation efforts, has been pivotal in managing this conflict. However, the success of these efforts remains limited due to several structural and strategic challenges, as well as the evolving nature of the conflict itself.

### **United Nations Peacekeeping Efforts:**

The United Nations' peacekeeping operations in Abyei, primarily conducted through the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), aim to provide security, support humanitarian aid, and monitor the ceasefire agreements between Sudan and

South Sudan. Established in 2011, UNISFA is a key component of the UN's broader peacekeeping strategy in the region. The mission was designed to prevent violence, ensure civilian protection, and assist in creating a conducive environment for political dialogue. However, its mandate is constrained by both practical limitations and political complexities.

Alterif and Abdelrakhim (2022) underscore the critical role that UNISFA plays in providing security in an otherwise volatile region. Despite its presence, the force faces challenges in maintaining effective control over the area due to the involvement of various armed factions and militias, which complicates its operational capacity. While the peacekeeping force has achieved some success in de-escalating violence and securing key infrastructure, its ability to enforce lasting peace remains under significant strain due to the absence of a comprehensive political solution. This is compounded by a lack of full cooperation from both the Sudanese and South Sudanese governments, which often use the region's status to further their respective national interests.

Further complicating the role of UN peacekeepers is the ethnic dimension of the Abyei conflict. The region is home to the Ngok Dinka and the Misseriya, two ethnic groups with competing claims to the area. The Ngok Dinka, who are predominantly aligned with South Sudan, claim Abyei as part of their historical homeland, while the Misseriya, a nomadic Arab group from Sudan, also assert territorial rights over Abyei. This ethnic polarization is not only a source of localized violence but also a major obstacle to the broader peace process. Dabala and Lencho (2020) highlight that the UN's peacekeeping force is caught in a web of these ethnic dynamics, often unable to fully address the tensions between these groups, which further complicates its mandate to ensure peace.

### **Diplomatic Mediation and Political Challenges:**

In addition to peacekeeping, the UN has also engaged in diplomatic efforts to mediate the dispute over Abyei. The UN's mediation efforts are primarily aimed at facilitating dialogue between Sudan and South Sudan, encouraging the governments of both countries to reach a peaceful resolution. However, the success of these efforts has been limited due to the lack of political will from both parties and the complexity of the territorial dispute. Gunawan (2024) suggests that despite the UN's efforts, the core issue of territorial sovereignty remains unresolved, and the dispute over Abyei has been used as a bargaining chip in broader negotiations between Sudan and South Sudan.

The failure to reach a political resolution is also exacerbated by the interference of regional and international actors, who often have competing interests in the region. For instance, the involvement of China in the Middle East and Africa, particularly with its strategic investments in Sudan, has complicated peace efforts. Karakir (2022) discusses how regional powers like China, while claiming to support peace initiatives, often prioritize economic interests over conflict resolution, further entrenching the political

deadlock. This external influence limits the UN's ability to negotiate a fair and lasting peace deal, as the interests of powerful external actors often overshadow those of the local populations.

### **Humanitarian Impact and the Role of UNMISS:**

The humanitarian situation in Abyei and South Sudan has worsened over the years due to ongoing violence, displacement, and economic instability. The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has been instrumental in providing humanitarian assistance and protection to civilians in both countries, including those affected by the conflict in Abyei. Zambakari et al. (2018) highlight that UNMISS has been particularly crucial in safeguarding humanitarian workers and providing aid to displaced populations. However, Rahman et al. (2022) argue that despite these efforts, the humanitarian relief provided by the UN has been insufficient in addressing the long-term needs of the civilian population, particularly in areas like Abyei, where access to aid is often obstructed by ongoing hostilities.

Furthermore, the peacebuilding efforts in Abyei have been undermined by the fragmented nature of local governance and the lack of state control over significant portions of the disputed territory. In some areas, the presence of local militias and armed groups, often linked to the Sudanese or South Sudanese governments, further complicates the delivery of humanitarian aid. Rahman et al. (2022) emphasize that the reliance on unarmed civilian peacekeepers, such as those deployed by organizations like Nonviolent Peaceforce, has been beneficial in de-escalating localized violence, but these peacekeepers lack the authority and resources needed to address broader political and military conflicts.

### **Multilateral Cooperation and the Path Forward:**

A more effective solution to the Abyei conflict will require multilateral cooperation that goes beyond the UN's peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts. Lumumba (2024) stresses that regional organizations, such as the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), must play a more proactive role in managing the conflict. The involvement of these regional actors could help ensure that the peace process remains focused on the concerns of the local population, rather than being overshadowed by the political interests of the conflicting governments or external powers. Additionally, a coordinated approach that integrates peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, and development efforts is crucial for addressing the root causes of the conflict.

The economic dimension of the conflict, which revolves around the control of oil resources in Abyei, must also be addressed as part of any comprehensive peace agreement. Agensky (2018) argues that the connection between religion, governance,

and the peace–humanitarian–development nexus in South Sudan provides a framework for integrating development into peacebuilding efforts. As economic development is integral to long-term peace, the international community must support efforts to establish joint resource management systems that can benefit both Sudan and South Sudan.

The United Nations' peacekeeping and mediation efforts in Abyei have been instrumental in preventing widespread violence, but their effectiveness remains limited by the region's complex ethnic and political dynamics. The conflict's persistence underscores the need for a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to peacebuilding that includes both local and international actors. Moving forward, the UN must continue to work alongside regional organizations and external stakeholders to develop a durable solution that addresses the underlying political, social, and economic causes of the Abyei conflict. Only through a combination of military, diplomatic, and developmental strategies can lasting peace be achieved in the region.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the conflict between Sudan and South Sudan in the Abyei area remains a complex and critical issue requiring urgent and sustained attention. The involvement of the United Nations (UN) in peacekeeping, human rights monitoring, and civilian protection is essential to mitigating the effects of this conflict. The results of this research align with the expectations set out in the introduction, as they underscore the key role of the UN, particularly the UNISFA mission, in maintaining peace between the two nations.

To ensure the effective implementation of the peace mandate, it is recommended that both the governments of Sudan and South Sudan engage in stronger collaboration to support the UN mission (UNISFA) and the Abyei Police Service. This collaboration is vital for the success of the peacekeeping efforts, as it would foster greater coordination and provide the necessary resources for conflict resolution. The continued dialogue and negotiation between the two governments are crucial for reaching a sustainable and long-lasting solution to the Abyei issue, especially concerning the management of resources such as oil fields.

The future prospects of research in this area could further explore the integration of regional cooperation through organizations like the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which could play a pivotal role in conflict mediation. Additionally, the application of further studies could look into the social and economic impacts of the conflict on local populations, investigating how peacebuilding strategies can be tailored to include local voices and perspectives. Lastly, future research could delve into the role of peacekeepers in post-conflict settings, focusing on

their capacity to address both immediate security concerns and long-term development in the region.

In conclusion, achieving peace and stability in Abyei requires a unified approach from all involved parties, including the UN, the governments of Sudan and South Sudan, and local communities. By fostering cooperation and supporting peacekeeping efforts, a sustainable resolution to the Abyei conflict is possible. Continued research and collaboration among stakeholders will be crucial in advancing long-term peace and development in the region.

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