

1.1 Strategic Summary

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Mass protests and political upheavals across the Middle East and North Africa, unexpected crises in Kyrgyzstan and Madagascar, ongoing conflicts, long-standing political stalemates, and countries recovering from conflict drove continued reliance on political missions over the past year.

Different mandates, models, and methods of engagement reflect the diversity of purposes in which political missions are involved, from preventive diplomacy to conflict mediation to peacebuilding. Shared among all of the missions covered in this volume, however, is their focus on political engagement with governments, armed groups and civil society to prevent, mitigate, or end conflict.

In June 2011, the United Nations General Assembly reaffirmed the importance of mediation for conflict management and recommended that the Secretary-General (SG) further strengthen the mediation capacities of the UN. The resolution, together with two forthcoming SG reports on preventive diplomacy and on funding and backstopping for special political missions, should encourage further enhancement of the UN's conflict prevention and peacebuilding capacity, and its cooperation with regional and sub-regional mediation efforts. These developments suggest that the growth in political missions is likely to continue in the coming years.

The United Nations remains the largest institutional platform for the deployment of political missions in terms of number of missions, field personnel, and operating budget. The 18 current UN special political missions covered in this volume – the majority supported by the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) – employ nearly 3,900

national and international civilian staff and cost some \$644.9 million. Most UN political missions are deployed in the Middle East and Africa.

The shifting political dynamics and realignments triggered by the “Arab Spring” have created new challenges and entry points for existing political missions in the Middle East and North Africa – particularly the UN Special Coordinator Office for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) and the Office of the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) – to reinvigorate stalled political processes. The ongoing crisis in Syria, the formation of a Hezbollah-majority government in Lebanon and initial indictments by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, the unfolding transition in Egypt, and the Palestinian bid for statehood will all have direct, if still uncertain, consequences for regional bargaining positions and interests.

The Libyan government's crackdown on public protests, and the subsequent Security Council-authorized NATO military action to protect civilians, has generated a flurry of diplomatic initiatives aimed at bringing the crisis to a close. In March 2011, the UN Secretary-General appointed a Special Envoy for Libya and the AU designated an Ad-Hoc High-Level Committee to seek a political resolution to the civil war in Libya. Once a resolution is in place, it is expected that a post-conflict UN presence will be authorized, though the configuration remains unclear. Notably, the European Union (EU) opted to open a European External Action Service (EEAS) office in Benghazi, rather than appoint an EU Special Representative (EUSR) – a clear indication of its trend away from special envoys in the wake of the Lisbon Treaty.

Libya has also highlighted the challenges faced by the UN and other multilateral and bilateral envoys in terms of effective coherence and coordination amid intense international involvement. The multitude of political envoys from various international, regional and sub-regional organizations struggle to reach agreement on objectives, and appear unable to designate an overall lead. In the absence of more strategic engagement, Libya has demonstrated the risk of political activities working at cross-purposes and even undermining political objectives, inadvertently or not. And while mediation efforts by sub-regional and regional organizations at times have more legitimacy (at least among certain parties), their limited capacity can also impede their effectiveness.

This year's *Review* offers improved data on the African Union (AU), which works alongside UN peacekeeping and political missions in twelve liaison offices across the continent and in the Comoros (where the AU has maintained several electoral and security assistance missions since 2003). The liaison offices are under-resourced relative to political missions deployed by other multilateral organizations. Nonetheless, AU political missions are likely to increase in the foreseeable future as the organization takes on more operational responsibilities across Africa. In addition to its mediation efforts in Libya, for example, the AU was actively – if unsuccessfully – engaged in efforts to diplomatically resolve the post-election stand-off in Côte d'Ivoire, to broker a peace agreement in Darfur, and to support the post-referendum negotiations between Sudan and South Sudan.

Africa hosts the largest number of political missions – reflecting the concentration of countries transitioning out of armed conflict over the past decade. In March 2011, Member States expanded DPA's operational presence on the continent through the establishment of the UN Office in Central Africa (UNOCA) – its fourth regionally-focused mission, joining the UN Office in West Africa (UNOWA), the recently integrated UN Office to the African Union (UNOAU)¹ and the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA). In addition to the UN and the AU, there is a growing sub-regional peace and security architecture, including dedicated mediation support.

In Central Asia, the standing conflict prevention mandate of the UNRCCA enabled the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Central Asia to immediately respond to the popular uprisings and subsequent inter-ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. As Charles Call observes in his contribution to the volume, the coordinated response by the UN, OSCE, EU and other regional organizations to the April-June 2010 crisis underscored the value of effective collaboration across envoys, and in particular the comparative advantage of regional offices and/or envoys.

The crisis in Kyrgyzstan arguably marked a turning point for UNRCCA's activities, from largely cross-boundary issues like water management, terrorism and transnational organized crime – issues explored in Camino Kavanagh and James Cockayne's thematic essay – to greater internal political engagement as regional governments acknowledge the risk of similar developments within their borders, and the potential consequences of regional spillover.

Moreover, while the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) begins to draw down in Afghanistan, discussions about seeking a negotiated political settlement with the Taliban are intensifying in Western capitals. The drawdown will reconfigure the strategic environment, shifting attention away from military efforts and onto the political role of the UN. As it is asserting greater authority and leadership amid the changing environment, the Afghan government initiated a mandate review due later this year, with the likely intention of reducing the political role of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), possibly resulting in the appointment of a separate UN envoy to guide the mediation effort. At the same time, a reduction in the security umbrella provided to UNAMA will increase the mission's vulnerability in a still volatile security environment. Meanwhile, the significant reduction in US military forces in Iraq has resulted in a growing reliance by the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) on Iraqi security forces for protection, potentially increasing its vulnerability and restricting its access.

The analysis in this volume highlights another critical determinant for the effectiveness of political

missions: the level of resources, including funding, logistics and staffing.

Within the UN, funding for political missions is drawn from the regular budget, limiting the support systems and operational tools available. At UN headquarters, this arrangement means there is no “support account” to fund political and other expert and logistical backstopping, while in the field, it results in limited start up and expansion resources. The divergent financing mechanisms prevent resource sharing between peacekeeping operations and political missions. Basic political desk officer backstopping and other specialist support functions for several UN missions, such as deploying the Standing Police Capacity for police reform or supporting anti-piracy mandates, are funded through extra-budgetary means. (OSCE and EU missions, too, have required extra-budgetary funding.) In order to respond to urgent or unforeseen crises, these organizations have to fundraise, even when such activities are core aspects of the missions’ mandates. This hampers capacity and response time, risking escalation of the crisis in the interim. Meanwhile, UNAMA and UNAMI – which together account for over half of the UN’s expenditure on political missions – have sparked interest in improving UN budgetary committee oversight of these operations.

Staffing, too, remains a challenge. The difficulty arises in part because of the different UN financial systems governing political missions and peacekeeping operations. Timely recruitment of qualified mediation and thematic experts, including electoral, police, and public information staff, has been hampered by internal UN rules that limit “lending” personnel across the Departments of Political Affairs and Peacekeeping Operations. Mission vacancy rates – as high as 32 percent for UNAMA – are exacerbated by outmoded mechanisms for tapping expertise from outside the UN system. At the recommendation of the Review of International Civilian Capacities,² DFS is establishing a “civilian partnership cell” that should enable political missions to better access, select and deploy external capacities they require.

Political engagement is further affected by logistical capabilities. In missions operating in insecure environments, like UNAMI, security measures – including armored vehicles and hardened offices – are a significant portion of

the mission’s budget. Elsewhere, geographic challenges, including limited infrastructure and significant distances, place a premium on access to air transport. During the successful response to the crisis in Guinea in 2008, for instance, UNOWA SRSG Said Djinnit traveled to Conakry frequently – more than 40 times since taking up his post. The DFS Global Field Support Strategy has proposed innovative solutions for peacekeeping that could be adapted to smaller political missions, including sharing air assets with neighboring missions and pooling mission support functions at regional hubs.

Finally, one of the structural causes for the UN’s lack of political mission reform is the absence of any natural constituency in the UN. Political missions have no equivalent to the formal peacekeeping structures in the Security Council (i.e., the peacekeeping working group) and the General Assembly’s Fourth Committee (the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, or “C34”), nor to the informal networks of military officers, training centers and think tanks that underpin the global peacekeeping partnership. Members of this partnership have lobbied for peacekeeping reforms over the last twenty years following, for example, the Rwanda genocide, the fall of Srebrenica, and repeated cases of sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping operations. Two possible institutional homes for SPMs are the currently dormant conflict prevention Group of Friends, as well as a new and active mediation Group of Friends, which championed the recent General Assembly resolution on mediation.

All of these efforts in combination with recommendations emerging from the forthcoming Secretary-General’s reports on preventive diplomacy and on special political mission funding and backstopping, aim to strengthen the effectiveness of political missions as a tool for conflict prevention, crisis management and sustaining hard-fought peace over the longer-term. Other organizations deploying political missions would be well served to follow UN discussions on improving political mission funding and backstopping, with a view to spotlighting and improving their own mechanisms for deploying, sustaining and transitioning their missions.

The *Review* illustrates the wide range of activities and areas of deployment of political missions – a function of their adaptable mandates

and flexible deployment. In the year ahead, the continued turmoil of the Arab Spring across the broader Middle East and beyond, presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled across much of Africa, the rising costs of food and fuel, and

transnational threats like organized crime and terrorism, are all potential flashpoints. Whether in existing crises or future ones, political missions will be a crucial means of international response.

NOTES

- 1 The UN Office to the AU, which combines political and peacekeeping liaison duties, is not treated as a political mission in this Review, as its primary focus is inter-organizational relations.
- 2 Civilian Capacity in the Aftermath of Conflict: Independent report of the Senior Advisory Group, March 2011 www.civcapreview.org