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# Reforming the UN Special Political Missions (SPMs)

*GA4 (Special Political and Decolonisation)*



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## Introduction

Since the conception of the United Nations (UN) in 1945, the duty to maintain international peace and diplomacy has been a responsibility the organisation has shouldered. Peacekeeping Operations (POs) have been the central focus of UN engagement in regards to conflict, often including a variety of methods such as the involvement of both military and civilians. However in recent years, as conflicts see a staggering rise in complexity regarding both their methods and solutions, the use of force must be reconsidered as a possible source of continued tension that disregards many relevant variables. New stakeholders who may have never been considered a mere century ago come into play, devastating consequences of miniscule actions must be considered, and rising tensions make international peace seem like a distant dream. In order to come to the most successful resolutions for all parties, the United Nations has begun to increasingly rely on Special Political Missions (SPMs) as a means to achieving their goals diplomatically without the use of force.

SPMs refer to civilian-led field missions set by the UN for the purpose of mediation, conflict prevention, and post-conflict peacebuilding. Unlike POs, the use of military personnel as a means of persuasion does not occur, emphasising a commitment towards diplomacy. Gradually their numbers have increased, reflecting the shift of UN engagement towards interventions that do not require force and rather prioritise international dialogue. For various reasons, these missions have been favoured over traditional POs and now operate in some of the most politically complex regions in the world.

Despite their explicit advantages, SPMs regularly face a variety of complications that hold back their potential to work towards international peace. This report examines the issue of reforming the UN special political missions through investigation of their history and functions, and their implications in conflict-ridden contexts. Remembering the sacred duty of the UN to safeguard international peace and diplomacy, these missions must be seen as extensions of this vision and therefore must be reformed into a tool for its success. Analysing and developing a deeper understanding of the current mechanisms and structures of SPMs may yield innovative ideas that will aid in the supporting of politically peaceful solutions in an increasingly tense global environment.

## Definition of key terms

### *Good offices*

Various kinds of actions, in a UN context from the Secretary-General, to call for negotiations between conflicting States to come into existence. Notably, they do not refer to mediation.

### *Host-state consent*

Consent and agreement from the main parties involved in a specific conflict or issue.

### *Impartiality*

The commitment of the UN and all relevant bodies to act without bias, focusing on providing support and aid to those in most urgent need to ensure neutrality, justice, and equality.

### *Integrated missions*

Missions with the aim of bringing all relevant actors under one coherent strategy, led by a Special Representative of the Secretary-General. (SRSG)

### *Mandate*

An official set of instructions and authorisations given to a UN-related group (such as a SPMs) that outline their role, tasks, and authority.

### *Mandate creep*

The expansion of a mandate usually under uncontrolled circumstances that weaken the effectiveness of a mandate's initial goals.

### *Peacebuilding Commission (PBC)*

An intergovernmental advisory body of the UN that was jointly established by the Security Council and General Assembly. Their aim is to provide support in post-conflict countries in the efforts of restoring and establishing peace.

### *Peacekeepers*

Individuals who attempt to maintain and uphold peace, specifically within an organisation. In this context, the term refers to individuals working in SPMs.

### *Preventative diplomacy*

Diplomatic actions taken in order to prevent disputes from escalating into conflicts, as well as limiting the spread of conflicts in the occasion that they have already occurred.

### *Protection of civilians (PoC)*

A core principle in SPMs as well as other UN missions that prioritises the safety of civilians. The Security Council has formally recognised PoC on its agenda since 1999.

## General Overview

SPMs serve as a critical practice used by the UN in the efforts of preventing conflict or lessening its spread that have increasingly been seen in deployment over the years. Unlike POs which the UN has historically been identified with regarding their engagement in conflict zones, SPMs do not involve the use of force or military and police components. Instead, they are defined as civilian-led field operations, with the goal to support mediation, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding in various conflict and post-conflict zones.

The first SPM was established on the 14th of May 1948, roughly 2 weeks before the first PO in the Middle East. The General Assembly had mandated for a UN mediator to be placed in Palestine, with Swedish diplomat Folke Bernadotte being appointed the role a week later. 77 years later, there are currently over 30 active SPMs across the entire globe, ranging from monitoring teams to representatives that carry out good office mandates. Most recently in November of 2024, the Security Council voted on the dissolution of the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) in order to establish its successor, the UN Transition Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNTMIS). Much like many other SPMs, changes are often enacted to a mandate as a result of evolving political landscapes.

### *Functions and structure*

There are three main bodies that hold the authority to mandate an SPM, that being the Security Council, the General Assembly, or the Secretary-General following communications with the President of the General Assembly. Following an SPM being mandated, it will most likely be designed, overseen, and supported by the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA).

As a result of the wide variety of activities that fall under the category of SPMs, they are often grouped into three separate clusters. Though not necessarily defined in their mandate, each SPM can roughly be separated into these groups. They can be identified as:

- Smaller-scale operations limited to a minimal and select group of individuals (representatives of the Secretary-General, special envoys etc.)
- Entities and mechanisms that function within the host country (sanction monitoring teams, specialised groups and panels etc.)
- Field-based missions often in the form of regional offices that are in support of a political process or other missions.

The largest SPMs often fall under the category of field-based missions such as the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) or the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI). However, this does not necessarily connote that these field-based missions are the most valuable or effective. Furthermore, in contrast to POs, SPMs often consist of much smaller groups of personnel, however may still operate with significant budgets. Though budgeting is not relevant in an MUN context, it illustrates the significance that is placed on these missions and brings into question whether they are being spent wisely.

### *Controversies and relevant issues*

All SPMs mandated in various regions in the world face the same set of challenges, albeit with differences depending on each region's circumstances. The key issue that they all face lies in their planning, which often lack sufficient operational and conceptual analysis of the situations at hand. The main elements that SPMs often lack are the necessary political backing and tools, operational understanding of the task to be carried out, and host-state consent. When these critical components are missing from SPMs, they often face great struggle in achieving their mandates as well as garner support from the population.

Though often overlooked in terms of logistical planning, host-state consent (including that of the region's population) is one of the most crucial elements to whether or not an SPM will succeed. A lack of proper communication can breed mistrust, which may lead to host governments viewing SPMs as an infringement on their sovereignty and a hostile foreign influence. Furthermore, this lack of host-state consent can directly endanger the lives of peacekeepers, through host governments potentially blocking or delaying the delivery of critical resources as well as preventing the planning of a strategic exit. Furthermore, populations who do not see SPMs as a source of positive change are reluctant to cooperate and engage with them, further limiting the impact of SPMs in its region.

Another aspect that may hinder an SPM's performance regarding public relations is the high expectations that populations and mandates may have, compared to the realistic output of SPMs. Due to the fact that SPMs (as well as POs) are often mandated in politically volatile regions, the general public holds expectations for them to provide a great amount of support and services such as education, governance, and healthcare. In comparison to what they are actually able to achieve in certain time periods, they may feel that these missions are ineffective and grow frustrated. Mandates are also often over-ambitious, further contributing to the disappointment felt by populations.

Rising geopolitical tensions and rivalries within the Security Council often make it difficult for them to come to decisive actions to provide political backing towards SPMs. Combined with the inconsistent support of other international and intergovernmental organisations, SPMs often do not have the proper foundation that is required in order to properly carry out their mandates. Furthermore, it may also contribute to a lack of credibility and positive public perception. As a result of an unstable political foundation, the necessary resources that these missions require may also be lacking, further limiting their capabilities to achieve their mandates and provide effective support in their regions.

Several host countries have also stated that they believe certain SPMs to be overstepping their roles and initiating mandate creeps. An example of this would be Iraqi officials criticising UNAMI's reports on human rights and election-related statements to be an overstep of their role as an advisory body. Host countries, especially those with highly volatile political environments, were against certain actions and statements made by SPMs as they were seen as a breach of sovereignty under foreign influence, such as certain Libyan factions accusing the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSML) of fabricating political settlements and pushing foreign influence through specifically selected officials.

## Major parties involved

### *United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA)*

The DPPA is one of the most crucial UN bodies in regards to all aspects regarding SPMs, and a key department of the UN Secretariat. Once an SPM is mandated by either the Security Council, General Assembly, or the Secretary-General, the DPPA will generally assume responsibility for its affairs such as its design, maintenance, staffing, and supervision. In a more general context outside of specific SPMs, they hold responsibility for the prevention and resolution of conflicts internationally, through actions such as mediation, peacekeeping, election assistance, and support to other UN bodies and Member States.

### *United Nations Secretary-General*

The Chief Administrative Officer of the United Nations responsible for overseeing the Secretariat. In this specific context, the Secretary-General is authorised to mandate SPMs following an exchange of letters with the President of the Security Council, one of the three main methods of mandating an SPM. Furthermore, they may drive policy and structure changes, as well as advise the Security Council and General Assembly.

### *United Nations Security Council*

One of the six principal organs of the United Nations, the Security Council is responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security. They are authorised to not only form binding resolutions and issue sanctions, but are the main body that mandates SPMs. Furthermore, they are responsible for providing SPMs the political backing required to carry out their mandates. They are generally responsible for mandating SPMs, with most SPMs being mandated by the Security Council.

### *Iraq*

Before the end of UNAMI's mandate on December 31st of 2025, Iraq hosted the SPM that aided them with the main goal of providing advice and assistance to improve political dialogue, assisting the electoral process, and community-level reconciliation. Overall, they view SPMs as a useful and powerful tool to improve various aspects of their political system however also believe that, like many other states, they must require the consent of the host country and only provide assistance on issues that the nations deems relevant. Though they are not against SPM's sovereignty and consent is their top priority.

### *Afghanistan*

The host country of UNAMA, one of the largest SPMs currently in operation. Their stance on SPMs, specifically on UNAMA, is complex due to their current de-facto authorities. Though they are supportive of UNAMA's efforts to provide aid and development assistance, they remain divided on issues such as human rights, specifically regarding the rights of women. Though representatives of Afghanistan are in full support of UNAMA, the issue lies in cooperation difficulties with the Taliban, specifically their unwillingness and failure to address concerns over the unequal representation within governance and ongoing human rights violations.

## Timeline of events

- 1948 May 14<sup>th</sup>** The first SPM is established with Swedish diplomat Folke Bernadotte being appointed as a UN Mediator in Palestine.
- 1992 June 17<sup>th</sup>** Former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali issues his report titled “An Agenda for Peace”, establishing the urgent need for preventative diplomacy as a tool for peacekeeping in the post-cold war era.
- 2000 August 21<sup>st</sup>** The Brahimi Report led by Lakhdar Brahimi is released, highlighting the shortcomings of UN peacekeeping and calling for major reforms on various UN activities as well as influencing future UN operations.
- 2002 March 28<sup>th</sup>** UNAMA, one of the largest SPMs, is established through the Security Council resolution 1401, as a result of a request by the Afghan Government for the purpose of support in establishing the development and peace.
- 2003 August 14<sup>th</sup>** UNAMI, another large SPM, is established through the Security Council resolution 1500 at the request of the Government of Iraq.
- 2007 August 10<sup>th</sup>** The role of UNAMI is greatly expanded through the adoption of the Security Council resolution 1770 to include items such as political mediation and electoral assistance into its mandate.
- 2011 October 12<sup>th</sup>** The first official review of the UN SPMs is released, identifying various challenges that they face including in regards to budgeting and political backing. As a result, SPM reforms are made a formal agenda item in the General Assembly.
- 2018 January 1<sup>st</sup>** The UN Peace and Security reform is launched, prioritising elements such as prevention, sustaining peace, and enhancing the effectiveness of SPMs and POs. The DPPA is officially established, taking on the roles of the former Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO).
- 2023 July 20<sup>th</sup>** Secretary-General António Guterres presents his official policy brief “A New Agenda for Peace”, outlining various necessary steps that must be taken by the UN in the current political landscape, including the importance of SPMs.

## Relevant UN treaties and events

**S/RES/1401; Establishment of UNAMA:** Security Council resolution establishing UNAMA and affirming political support with considerations to Afghan sovereignty, 28 March 2002.

**A/66/340; Review of arrangements for funding and backstopping special political missions:** General Assembly resolution affirming changes to SPM funding arrangements and improvement of mandate clarity, 12 October 2011.

**A/RES/78/79; Comprehensive review of special political missions:** General Assembly resolution affirming the need for preventative diplomacy such as SPMs, respect for national sovereignty, and key roles of minority groups such as women and youth, 11 December 2023.

**A New Agenda for Peace:** An outline of Secretary-General António Guterres' visions for peace and security through multilateral diplomacy, affirming the importance of SPMs in the modern age of conflict prevention, 20 July 2023.

## Previous attempts to solve the issue

Approximately 60 years following the first established SPM, the UN General Assembly released their first official review. This event came following challenges faced by these missions in various regions in the world, most notably in regards to funding and political backing. A main concern that was identified was that many SPMs drew the majority of their political backing from the DPPA, the Department of Field Support, and the Global Service Centre. However, none of these bodies drew funding from the programme budget, leading to inadequate supplies and resources. The core issue identified within this report to later be reformed were in regards to unstable frameworks, an element of planning that is crucial to SPMs who operate in volatile environments with spontaneous needs of resources and support. Though not enough to cause tangible change within SPMs, reviewing these missions on a consistent basis in order to identify challenges and possible reforms is an effective and feasible method currently in use by the UN.

Following the Brahimi Report's release in the year 2000, the term "integrated missions" arose as a method to ensure coherence in SPMs between UN Country Teams and other relevant parties. They involved the leadership of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) to ensure that all parties involved (both UN and non-UN) worked under a common strategy and spoke under a single aligned voice. Though they had been present within UN peacekeeping following the end of the Cold War, the term itself had not yet been recognised until the issuing of the Brahimi Report, leading to a greater push for integrated missions within SPMs.

In 2018, the DPPA was officially established to provide support and oversee SPMs across the globe. They took on roles previously assigned to various other bodies, specially the DPA and PBSO, in order to unite all efforts under one aligned department. The core issue addressed with its establishment was communication and cooperation, maximising an SPMs potential for positive contributions in their respective regions. Much of the current reforms made to SPMs follow a similar train of thought as that which went into the establishment of the DPPA; coherence of strategy and unity under a common goal.

## Possible solutions

One of the core technical issues that are currently limiting the outreach and effectiveness of SPMs are their mandates. Many believe that their contents are too vague and lack proper distinction between decisive actions that must be taken and supporting activities that are not necessarily a priority. As such, one solution that a delegate may propose is to provide greater clarity and structure to SPM mandates before they are deployed. This may include items regarding a required number of priorities that are distinct from other activities, a requirement for proper and coherent exit strategies, limitations on an SPM to prevent mandate creeps, or other specifications that a delegate believes would strengthen the effectiveness of SPMs.

A major challenge faced by the majority of SPMs, particularly those in extremely volatile environments, is the lack of host-state consent and approval from the general public. When a nation or their people are unwilling to cooperate with the efforts of an SPM, it is inevitable that their impacts will be limited. Depending on the stance of a delegate, there are multiple solutions that may be proposed in order to alleviate this mistrust and lack of cooperation. One solution may be to ensure proper political backing through UN bodies such as the DPPA before the deployment of an SPM, maximising their impacts through preparation. Other delegates may also propose that SPMs must prioritise a nation's sovereignty, and therefore may suggest that they must abide by a nation's requirements with minimal debate. The involvement of a nation's people themselves through local non-profit organisations or popularity-boosting programmes may be another solution proposed.

Oftentimes, SPMs may be far too bureaucratic for the environment that they operate in, limiting the response times to spontaneous events. Delegates may also propose solutions that provide increased flexibility to SPMs, which may come as a result of smaller-scale operations, increased authority being granted to individuals such as SRSGs, or stream-lined processes required to take action. Flexibility in SPMs may further contribute to positive approval from civilian populations, working in tandem with other possible solutions regarding host-state consent and increased cooperation.

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