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Humanitarian Governance in Retreat: *Civilian Perceptions* of UNMISS Field Office Closures in South Sudan

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Introduction

Since South Sudan's independence in 2011, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has played a central role in the country's political and humanitarian landscape. Its mandate includes the protection of civilians, monitoring and investigating human rights violations, supporting the implementation of peace agreements, and helping create conditions for long-term peace and stability (United Nations Peace Operations 2025). In practice, however, UNMISS has been more than a formal peacekeeping mission. In many communities, its field offices have represented international attention, protection, mobility, local employment, humanitarian coordination, and a visible reminder that violence and insecurity are being observed (Aweil interview participant, interview by author, August 2026; Torit interview participant, interview by author, August 2026).

This project examines how UNMISS field office closures in Aweil, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, and Torit, Eastern Equatoria, are understood from below. In 2025, UNMISS announced closures and reductions of field offices as part of wider budget-driven restructuring (United

Nations News 2025; Gaston and Nickel 2026). Sudans Post reported that the Aweil office would close because of a global funding crisis that forced UNMISS to reduce operations by 15 percent, while UNMISS stated that patrols and engagement would continue from Wau and neighboring bases (Sudans Post 2025b). In Torit, UNMISS announced the closure of its Eastern Equatoria field office as part of a broader scale-down, while stating that support would continue from Juba through mobile teams and partner organizations (Sudans Post 2025d; Radio Tamazuj 2025b).

The official language surrounding these closures emphasizes funding cuts, restructuring, transition, and government responsibility (Sudans Post 2025b; Sudans Post 2025d; Radio Tamazuj 2025b). However, this language does not fully capture how field office closures are experienced locally (Aweil interview participant, interview by author, August 2026; Torit interview participant, interview by author, August 2026). This research asks: How do local communities perceive UNMISS field office closures in Aweil and Torit, and how do these perceptions complicate traditional measures of peacekeeping effectiveness?

I argue that UNMISS field office closures should not be understood only as administrative or budgetary decisions. In Aweil and Torit, field offices also carried symbolic, practical, economic, and protection-related value (Aweil interview participant, interview by author, August 2026; Torit interview participant, interview by author, August 2026). Their reduction changed how local and community-connected actors understood proximity, reassurance, visibility, government responsibility, and peacekeeping effectiveness. Aweil shows that withdrawal matters even where there is no immediate dramatic violence. Torit shows that withdrawal feels more urgent where protection risks are visible. Together, the two cases suggest that peacekeeping success should be measured not only by mandates, budgets, and official transition plans, but also by how communities experience what remains after a mission leaves.

Background and Literature

UN peacekeeping transitions are most of the time discussed through the language of mandate completion, host-state responsibility, stabilization, and financial sustainability. However, recent debates on peacekeeping withdrawal show that mission departures can create serious protection gaps. A 2025 report by the Norwegian Refugee Council, CIVIC, and the Global Protection Cluster argues that the departure of peacekeepers can create a major protection gap, especially when state security actors lack either the capacity or the will to protect civilians. The report describes this as a possible “security cliff,” where protection decreases sharply after peacekeeping withdrawal (NRC, CIVIC, and GPC 2025).

The same report also emphasizes early warning and community engagement. Peacekeeping missions, including UNMISS, have developed systems through which communities can communicate protection threats to the mission or state actors. These systems often depend on national staff, community liaison structures, and field-level relationships. When a mission withdraws, those relationships and systems can weaken (NRC, CIVIC, and GPC 2025). This matters for South Sudan because many communities experience protection not only through direct armed intervention, but also through the knowledge that there is an accessible actor nearby that can monitor, report, coordinate, and respond (Torit interview participant, interview by author, August 2026; SFASID and PKSOI 2020).

Recent writing on UN peacekeeping finances also supports this concern. A United Nations University analysis argues that field offices operate as part of a wider network of coverage. When sites are closed, patrols must be launched from more centralized bases, reducing frequency, reach, visibility, and the ability to maintain sustained presence across difficult terrain.

It specifically identifies closed field sites including Torit and Aweil, and argues that these closures can mean fewer patrols, longer response times, and reduced visibility in remote areas (Gaston and Nickel 2026).

These debates provide the wider framework for this project. The question is not simply whether UNMISS remains formally committed to South Sudan. The more important question is how the quality of its presence changes when field offices close and support is moved to more distant hubs. A mission may still exist nationally, but local communities may experience its reduction as distance, silence, slower response, or declining attention (Gaston and Nickel 2026; Aweil interview participant, interview by author, August 2026; Torit interview participant, interview by author, August 2026).

Methodology

This project uses a qualitative comparative case study of Aweil and Torit. It draws on remote interviews, focused on Aweil and Torit, alongside public-source analysis of UNMISS reporting, local media, humanitarian reporting, and peacekeeping transition literature.

The interviews are not treated as a representative survey of all civilian views in Aweil or Torit. Due to time constraints, remote recruitment limits, and the difficulty of reaching a broad community sample, the interviews are used as evidence of what the community feels. The Aweil interviews focused on UNMISS partnership, reconfiguration, Wau-based support, reduced proximity, local economy, returnee pressure, and civilian expectations (Aweil interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026). The Torit interviews focused on UNMISS presence, field office closure, local security, youth violence, humanitarian coordination,

government capacity, and the difference between a physical field office and support from Juba (Torit interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026).

The analysis was organized around recurring themes: physical proximity, visibility, reassurance, deterrence, humanitarian coordination, local economy, government capacity, mandate expectations, and the difference between official transition language and local experience. This method allows the project to compare how two field office closures can produce different local meanings even when they are part of the same broader UNMISS downsizing process.

Case Study 1: Aweil

Aweil represents the quieter case in this study. Public reporting describes the Aweil closure primarily through funding cuts, reconfiguration, and staff concerns (Sudans Post 2025b; Sudans Post 2025c; Eye Radio 2025). Sudans Post reported that UNMISS announced plans to close its Aweil field office because of a global funding shortfall and a directive to reduce peacekeeping operations by 15 percent. UNMISS stated that even without a full field office, teams would continue patrolling and engaging with communities from Wau and neighboring states (Sudans Post 2025b). Eye Radio similarly reported that the Aweil office was expected to cease operations by December 31, 2025, and that a limited number of UNMISS staff would continue from the regional office in Wau (Eye Radio 2025).

This official framing matters because it presents the closure as a financial and administrative decision rather than a withdrawal from the community (Sudans Post 2025b; Eye Radio 2025). In one of the Aweil interviews, the participant also pushed back against the simple

term “closure,” suggesting that Aweil is better understood as a case of reconfiguration because the area remains administered from Wau (Aweil interview participant, interview by author, August 2026). From an institutional perspective, UNMISS has not disappeared. From a local perspective, however, the loss of a physical office still changes the quality of engagement.

The Aweil interview participant described UNMISS presence in Aweil as built through partnership and collaboration with humanitarian actors, civil society, women, youth, state authorities, and local institutions (Aweil interview participant, interview by author, August 2026). This suggests that the Aweil field office was not only a security structure. It also functioned as a platform for coordination, confidence-building, peace agreement implementation, and institutional support. Public reporting also describes UNMISS in Northern Bahr el Ghazal as involved in community reconciliation, local authority capacity-building, humanitarian support, and inter-communal dialogue (Sudans Post 2025b). The interview participants also described earlier forms of engagement, including patrols, short-duration patrols, long-duration patrols, air patrols, and wider community contact. After reconfiguration, these activities no longer happen in the same way (Aweil interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026).

The strongest theme from Aweil is physical proximity. The participants argued that being on the ground allows quicker response, easier engagement with state authorities, better coordination, and more effective brainstorming with partners (Aweil interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026). Managing Aweil from Wau introduces barriers: communication depends more heavily on phones, network connectivity can be unreliable, and face-to-face coordination becomes harder (Aweil interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026). In this sense, Wau-based support may keep UNMISS present administratively, but

it does not fully replace the relational and practical value of a local field office (Eye Radio 2025; Gaston and Nickel 2026; Aweil interview participant, interview by author, August 2026).

Aweil also shows that relative peace does not mean the absence of pressure. One of the interviewees repeatedly described Aweil and Northern Bahr el Ghazal as relatively peaceful, especially compared to other areas, but they also mentioned isolated criminality, night theft, economic hardship, returnees from Sudan, pressure on local resources, and cross-border pastoral migration dynamics (Aweil interview participant, interview by author, August 2026). Public sources support this more complicated picture. Sudans Post reported in July 2025 that residents in Aweil were calling for more security deployment because of robberies and assaults associated with youth gangs during a period of economic hardship (Sudans Post 2025a). Sudans Post also reported that the closure sparked concern among local staff who feared losing jobs, and that the governor raised questions about the socioeconomic impact of layoffs (Sudans Post 2025c).

Aweil therefore does not support a simple argument that UNMISS closure immediately caused insecurity. Instead, it shows how peacekeeping reduction can matter more quietly. The issues are reduced proximity, fewer routine engagements, weaker local coordination, potential economic effects, and the challenge of managing humanitarian pressure with fewer international actors physically present (Aweil interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026; Sudans Post 2025a; Sudans Post 2025c).

Case Study 2: Torit

Torit presents a more visible protection-gap concern. Sudans Post reported that UNMISS announced the closure of its Torit field office in October 2025, citing a severe global funding

shortage and a broader plan to scale down field operations by 15 percent. UNMISS reassured Eastern Equatoria that it was not abandoning the state and that support would continue from Juba through mobile teams and partners (Sudans Post 2025d). However, the same report noted that Governor Louis Lobong Lojore expressed concern about the timing of the closure, especially as South Sudan prepared for national elections (Sudans Post 2025d). Radio Tamazuj similarly reported that Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) Anita Kiki Gbeho visited Torit to announce the planned closure, while Governor Louis Lobong Lojore said he had hoped UNMISS would stay until after the elections (Radio Tamazuj 2025b).

The Torit interviews help explain why distance matters. A Torit interview participant described UNMISS presence as more than direct intervention. UNMISS patrols did not necessarily fight or directly handle incidents; they moved around, observed, assessed tensions, collected information, and reported back to authorities (Torit interview participant, interview by author, August 2026). The movement itself mattered because communities knew someone was watching. Peacekeeping protection is not only physical force. It is also visibility, observation, deterrence, and reassurance (Torit interview participant, interview by author, August 2026; SFASID and PKSOI 2020).

The interviewee also distinguished clearly between having UNMISS physically based in Torit and receiving occasional support from Juba. When UNMISS was based in Torit, its presence was more noticeable and more integrated into local life. After closure, visits from Juba became occasional and shorter (Torit interview participant, interview by author, August 2026). This shows that support from a distant hub does not feel the same as a permanent local field office, especially when field sites had previously served as launching points for patrols and rapid response (Gaston and Nickel 2026).

Torit's security environment makes this issue more urgent. Radio Tamazuj reported that fighting near Torit in November 2025 caused panic among residents, displaced families, and led some people to seek refuge at Our Lady of the Holy Rosary Catholic Church (Radio Tamazuj 2025a). The Vicar General of the Catholic Diocese of Torit condemned the violence and described children and mothers sheltering at the church, linking insecurity to wider economic disruption and blocked roads (Radio Tamazuj 2025a). This evidence shows why the closure was not experienced only as a bureaucratic adjustment. It occurred in a context where local people still faced real protection concerns.

One participant also emphasized economic effects. They described Torit as a “job economy” in which UNMISS salaries, local staff, contracts, and spending contributed to the market (Torit interview participant, interview by author, August 2026). This mirrors one of the Aweil interviews, where UNMISS presence was also described as boosting the local market through staff, contracts, purchasing, and demand (Aweil interview participant, interview by author, August 2026). Across both cases, UNMISS field offices were local economic actors as well as peacekeeping institutions.

Finally, Torit raises the question of government capacity. The Torit interview participants suggested that institutions such as police and local government exist, but they face limited resources (Torit interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026). This complicates the transition narrative. In theory, protection of civilians is the responsibility of the sovereign state. In practice, the capacity to provide protection depends on resources, mobility, trust, and response systems (NRC, CIVIC, and GPC 2025; SFASID and PKSOI 2020). When UNMISS withdraws or reduces local presence, responsibility may shift faster than capacity can grow.

Cross-Case Analysis

Aweil and Torit show different local meanings of the same broader UNMISS downsizing process. In Aweil, the closure is better understood as reconfiguration: support continues from Wau, and the area remains relatively peaceful (Eye Radio 2025; Aweil interview participant, interview by author, August 2026). However, the interviews and public sources show that reconfiguration still reduces proximity, engagement, responsiveness, and economic activity (Aweil interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026; Gaston and Nickel 2026). Aweil also faces returnee pressure, resource strain, local insecurity, and employment concerns (Aweil interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026; Sudans Post 2025a; Sudans Post 2025c). Its significance is that withdrawal matters even without dramatic violence.

Torit, by contrast, shows a stronger protection-gap concern. The closure was publicly explained as budget-driven, but it occurred in a context of road insecurity, fighting near Torit, displacement, church-based refuge, and local concern about timing (Sudans Post 2025d; Radio Tamazuj 2025a; Radio Tamazuj 2025b). In this case, support from Juba may continue, but the loss of a permanent local field office affects visibility, reassurance, and confidence (Torit interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026; Gaston and Nickel 2026).

The two cases also reveal a gap between mandate-based evaluation and civilian-centered evaluation. Official metrics may ask whether UNMISS continues priority activities, whether the mission remains present nationally, or whether government institutions are formally responsible (United Nations Peace Operations 2025; Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon 2013). Local experience asks different questions: Is anyone nearby? Can communities reach someone quickly? Are patrols still visible? Do people trust the response system? Does the market lose jobs and

spending? Are humanitarian actors still coordinated? Do civilians feel seen? (Aweil interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026; Torit interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026).

A final theme is the difference between mandate and expectation. Some of the interviewees from Aweil observed that civilians may expect “the UN” to provide food, health, schools, education, and other services, even when UNMISS has a specific peacekeeping mandate (Aweil interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026). The Torit interviews similarly showed that some community views of UNMISS are shaped by whether people benefited from the mission economically or understood its mandate (Torit interview participants, interviews by author, August 2026). This matters because peacekeeping effectiveness is not judged locally only by formal mandate language. It is judged through lived experience, expectations, and the visible presence of international actors.

Limitations

This project has several limitations. First, it is based on only six remote interviews rather than a broad community sample. The interviews do not represent all civilian views in Aweil or Torit. Second, remote research limits who can be reached and may overrepresent educated, connected, professional, or institutionally linked perspectives. Third, public media sources provide important context, but they cannot fully substitute for direct community-based fieldwork.

These limitations do not make the findings invalid, but they shape what the project can claim. The project identifies final findings from the evidence collected, not universal conclusions

about all communities in Aweil and Torit. Its contribution is to show why field office closures should be studied from below and why further community-centered research is necessary.

Conclusion

This project argues that UNMISS field office closures in Aweil and Torit should not be understood only through funding cuts, administrative restructuring, or formal transition language. Field offices matter because they create proximity, visibility, coordination, economic activity, reassurance, and a sense of connection to wider protection systems.

Aweil shows that peacekeeping withdrawal can matter even in a relatively peaceful area. There, the key issue is not immediate large-scale violence, but reduced proximity, weaker engagement, returnee pressure, economic strain, and the challenge of managing local protection concerns from a distance. Torit shows a more direct protection-gap concern. There, the closure occurred alongside visible insecurity, displacement, church-based refuge, road concerns, and uncertainty about whether Juba-based support can replace a local field office.

Together, the cases show that peacekeeping effectiveness should be measured not only by whether missions fulfill formal mandates or reduce budgets successfully. It should also be measured by how communities experience protection, trust, reassurance, and response after peacekeeping presence is reduced.

Peacekeeping success should not be measured only by when missions leave, but by how communities experience what remains after they leave.

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