

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Strategic Communications for Peace Operations: The African Union's Information War Against al-Shabaab

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Despite widespread agreement that effective strategic communications are a necessary part of complex peace operations, many missions struggle to generate relevant capabilities and implement effective campaigns. This article analyzes the experiences of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) as a case study of this problem. Specifically, it examines how the United Nations (UN) tried to fill the gap by hiring a consortium of private firms known as the AU-UN Information Support Team (IST) to wage a strategic communications campaign against al-Shabaab. The IST's goal was to drive, as well as communicate, AMISOM's success, improve the mission's media presence, and develop a communications strategy. The IST played an innovative and important function for AMISOM but suffered from several significant challenges that reduced its effectiveness. The conclusion therefore identifies four main lessons from AMISOM's experiences that could improve strategic communications for peace operations.

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## Introduction

There is very little scholarly literature on how to design and implement effective strategic communications for peace operations. The few examples have focused on the need for the United Nations (UN) to manage public opinion in its mission areas and utilize new communications technologies through effective information strategies (e.g. Lehmann 1999; Lindley 2004; Betz and Papper 2015; see also Lehmann 2015; Oksamytna 2017) or recommended that UN peacekeepers develop cultural awareness, i.e. 'the ability to attain knowledge about the particular cultural characteristics of the people of a certain terrain (state or region)' (Bellou 2014: 579;

see also Duffey 2000). There have also been periodic calls for specific missions to improve their strategic communications capabilities (e.g. Boutellis and Fink 2016: 24–25).

The lack of scholarly attention is surprising given that several international organizations engaged in peace and security activities have long recognized the importance of developing a strategic communications policy. Both the UN and European Union (EU), for example, have a Strategic Communications Division that deals with peace operations as part of their Department of Public Information and European External Action Service, respectively. Similarly, NATO has a strategic communications policy and a specific military concept for it (NATO 2009, 2010). Effective strategic communications have also been widely recognized as a

necessary part of countering insurgencies (e.g. Petraeus 2008) and combating terrorism (e.g. Fink and Barclay 2013).

At the UN, it is now widely agreed in principle that 'a broad-based, well-resourced and accurately evaluated strategic communications plan' is a necessary part of managing 'evolving expectations and build[ing] lasting support among central constituencies' for its contemporary peace operations (Challenges Forum 2015: 1). However, this is rarely implemented, prompting the 2015 High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (HIPPO) to recommend that communications teams must be deployed to ensure 'interactive two-way communications with the local people' and peace operations must possess 'modern and appropriate communications approaches and technologies' (HIPPO 2015: §309).

At the African Union (AU), however, the Commission's only strategic communications capability is the Directorate for Information and Communication, which focuses on the day-to-day communications about its general activities. The AU Commission's Peace and Security Department has no dedicated strategic communications capability. In 2016, there was an attempt to develop a public information policy and capacity for AU peace operations but it has not been completed. It drew heavily on the communications strategy developed for the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) (Interview, AU official, 3 December 2017).

This article therefore uses AMISOM as a case study to illustrate the importance of developing effective strategic communications for peace operations engaged in enforcement and stabilization activities and the challenges posed in the AU's case.<sup>1</sup> Among other things, it concludes that the AU has thus far operated without a dedicated strategic communications capacity for its peace operations and should develop one soon. Second, not only was AMISOM deployed without the capacity to conduct an information campaign, its contributing countries were not always willing to implement the communications strategy

that was subsequently developed. Third, successful strategic communications require more than just institutional capacity in the mission; they also require sustained, high-level political support from the key stakeholders beyond the mission to ensure that the agreed policies are implemented.

Following the scholarly literature, I define strategic communications as 'the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission' (Hallahan et al 2007: 3). Or, more precisely, as the 'coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences to support national objectives' (Paul 2011: 3). Its principal methods include audience analysis, goal setting, and message strategy.

In UN peace operations, such tasks are normally the remit of the Public Information Unit (PIU). However, the AU's lack of capabilities in this area meant that when AMISOM deployed to Mogadishu in March 2007, it did so without the ability to wage an effective strategic communications campaign. For its first two years, AMISOM had virtually no media presence or proactive communication strategy and operated with a 'bunker mentality' whereby media briefings were sporadic, poorly organized, the messaging confused and the tone defensive (IST 2012: 78). The resulting information vacuum played into the hands of opposition forces and undermined AMISOM's operational effectiveness. In particular, AMISOM's reputation with local Somalis and key international partners suffered from: incoherence of its narrative; opaqueness and lack of transparency; and problems related to civilian and AMISOM casualties and human rights violations perpetrated by the mission's personnel (Interview, former UNSOA official, 28 September 2017).

To remedy this situation and counter al-Shabaab's narrative of events, in November 2009 the UN Support Office for AMISOM (UNSOA) contracted a consortium of private firms that established the AU-UN Information Support Team (IST). Utilizing techniques employed in a variety of war

zones, the IST's goal was to drive, as well as communicate, AMISOM's success, improve the mission's media presence and develop a communications strategy. Working with AMISOM's tiny PIU, the IST devised key strategic information objectives related to maintaining the cooperation and support of the local population, informing international opinion of AMISOM's progress in order to sustain support from troop-contributing countries (TCCs) and donors, and promoting a culture of peace and non-violence in Somalia to create an environment for national reconciliation.

Especially between 2010 and late 2012, the IST actively countered al-Shabaab's strategic narrative in several respects, including building greater confidence in the mission and its effects. Later, however, several factors coalesced that reduced AMISOM's ability to deliver effective strategic communications. First, the environment in which the IST was asked to operate changed, most notably AMISOM's expansion beyond Mogadishu and the inclusion of new TCCs (Kenya, Djibouti, Sierra Leone, and Ethiopia), which eroded the mission's coherence. Second, during late 2012 and early 2013, the UN and AU competed over which organization should lead politically in Somalia, which made the IST's tasks more challenging. When the UN Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) deployed from mid-2013, there was a significant increase in international civilian staff in Mogadishu, which meant the IST was pulled in multiple, sometimes contradictory, directions. Finally, by the time a new set of firms took over the IST contract in late 2014, the IST had in some respects developed a different relationship with AMISOM, particularly over the scope for the IST's strategic communications experts to give autonomous advice to AMISOM's leadership. Unfortunately, this coincided with polling evidence that showed AMISOM's reputation with local Somali civilians reduced significantly during 2015 and 2016.

To address these issues, this article proceeds in two main parts. It begins by providing an overview of the AU-UN IST and its

efforts to promote a strategic narrative about AMISOM and Somalia. The second section discusses the major challenges faced by the IST, paying attention to the roles of AMISOM's contributing countries. The conclusion identifies four main lessons that should be drawn from AMISOM's experiences with strategic communications. As well as relevant official documents and scholarship, the article draws on interviews with relevant experts and personnel involved in these activities as well as internal, unpublished documents given to the author.

### **AMISOM's Strategic Communications**

AMISOM's principal objective in the strategic communications realm was to prevent al-Shabaab dominating the narrative about Somalia. It therefore devoted considerable time and effort to understanding how al-Shabaab conducted its media operations. Although al-Shabaab's strategic communications are not the focus of this article, it should be noted that the militants have run a very capable, multifaceted media and information operations campaign for over a decade (see ICG 2010; Hansen 2013; Anzalone 2016; Kriel 2017). They have consistently, and sometimes accurately, depicted successive Somali 'governments' and AMISOM's contributing countries as weak, corrupt and illegitimate. Al-Shabaab's two most important tools were radio and the Internet: it ran a Ministry of Information that used a network of FM radio stations (and some TV stations) known as al-Andalus and its rebranded media department Al-Kataib Media Foundation and News Channel produced material across multiple platforms in English and Somali, and then branched out into Swahili, Norwegian, Swedish and even Urdu.

Al-Shabaab's strategic communications were certainly not news to AMISOM, which conducted extensive analysis of them. The practical issue was translating a sophisticated understanding of al-Shabaab's operations into an effective plan to combat them, with the correct priorities and appropriate resources.

### ***Origins of the IST***

The origins of AMISOM's strategic communications capabilities lie in the deployment of the UN Support Office to AMISOM (UNSOA) in mid-2009 (see Williams 2017). Shortly after deploying to Mogadishu, UNSOA's leadership concluded that AMISOM could not adequately communicate with the local population under the existing conditions. So, it contracted a service provider to mount an information campaign in support of AMISOM. In November 2009, AMISOM signed a Support Implementation Agreement on Public Information whereby a consortium of three firms was hired to drive its strategic communications to a variety of target audiences (IST 2012: 3, 5). The three firms would subsequently form the AU-UN Information Support Team (IST).

The UN concluded that in Somalia private firms would provide more effective operations than their standard PIU approach. As a senior UNSOA official recalled, the primary reason for establishing a commercially contracted capability was that it provided 'a means for the UN to transfer risk to a deployable commercial entity' (Interview, former UNSOA official, 3 August 2017). This was largely because the intense insecurity in Mogadishu precluded the deployment of UN staff there. As was the case with UNSOA, a contracted capability permitted the deployment of personnel, as well as considerable flexibility in approach. This was not entirely unprecedented, since the UN had previously utilized contractors in some of its peacekeeping operations, including in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where they played a role in the establishment of local radio stations (Interview, former IST official, 20 July 2017).

Initially, the IST consortium comprised of Bell Pottinger (part of Chime Communications plc), which provided the strategic oversight and production research and project management; Albany Associates Ltd, which led on project strategy and direction, press news, and media development; and Okapi Consulting, which set up Radio Bar-Kulan in Somalia, a credible

Somali-language radio station, having previously established similar radio stations in the DRC, Central African Republic and Croatia (IST 2012: 9–10).<sup>2</sup> In terms of personnel, the IST built a team of consultants and staff recruited from the region and AMISOM TCCs as well as from Somalia itself who worked out of London, Nairobi and Mogadishu (IST 2012: 29, 31). There were about 20 employees in the general IST and approximately another 50 running Radio Bar-Kulan. By early 2011, the forward team in Mogadishu was about ten strong.

### ***The IST's Objectives and Methods***

At the time the IST contract began, AMISOM's strategic information objectives were: to maintain cooperation of the parties and the support of the local population; inform international opinion in order to sustain support from the mission's TCCs and partners; and to foster a culture of peace and non-violence (IST 2012: 7). This was all very well but AMISOM had no means to implement these objectives. Its own PIU had only one member of staff until 2011, when two new personnel were recruited (AMISOM 2011: §82). AMISOM could also call on the lone Public Information Officer the UN had seconded to Addis Ababa to help boost the AU Commission's capability in this area (Wikileaks Cable 2010: §2). But that was it. Even by early 2017, AMISOM's PIU had just one officer and one assistant (de Coning et al 2017). In retrospect, the IST team concluded: 'The resulting information vacuum and hostile misrepresentations of AMISOM's role played into the hands of opposition forces and undermined AMISOM's ability to accomplish its mandate' (IST 2012: 78). One senior IST official at the time therefore saw the consortium as 'a desperate and ultimately very successful attempt to reverse the appalling headlines emanating from Mogadishu about AMISOM' (Richard Bailey cited in Kriel 2017: 53).

Hence it was the IST that embarked on implementing a new information strategy for AMISOM. It did so through six core lines of effort (IST 2012: 8). First, it provided strategic

communications and information support to execute a strategic communications plan.<sup>3</sup> Second, it provided research, monitoring and analysis to map the information ecology and media landscape of Somalia, track public opinion, and test products to measure campaign effect. Third, it established Radio Bar-Kulan, which went on air on 1 March 2010 and began 24-hour broadcasting exactly one year later.<sup>4</sup> The content was intended to emphasize the growing level of normalcy in Mogadishu, that the population could openly criticize al-Shabaab, and that it was legitimate of the TFG to relax al-Shabaab's restrictions, such as watching football and texting freely (Interview, former IST official, 20 July 2017). The IST's fourth task was to establish a fast, professional and consistent media capability for AMISOM. As part of this it would produce and disseminate audio-visual material to support AMISOM's work and messages. Finally, it would conduct outreach to ordinary Somalis, key leaders and the diaspora.

In addition to organizing press conferences, briefings and releases, and weekly information meetings to coordinate with partners at the UN compound in Nairobi, the IST also developed a variety of products to strengthen AMISOM's media presence, including a website for the mission launched in March 2010 (AMISOM 2010: §81).<sup>5</sup> A media observatory site was implemented in June 2010 and shortly thereafter a summary of media reporting, including monitoring of al-Shabaab-affiliated radio.<sup>6</sup> Daily situation reports were also compiled and transmitted to the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa. Several publications were developed including the AMISOM fortnightly and quarterly bulletins, which distributed about 4,000 copies to international stakeholders. These were intended to keep stakeholders informed, maintain morale within the mission, and promote local ownership of the Somali peace process (IST 2012: 52). Numerous op-eds were also drafted on behalf of AMISOM's senior leadership and published in such outlets as *Foreign Policy* magazine and the

*East African, New Vision, Monitor* and *New Times* newspapers. Thousands of printed desktop and wall calendars were also produced. The IST also facilitated media visits to Mogadishu for international journalists and from the TCCs and potential TCCs. In 2010, it began holding media training workshops in Nairobi for key AMISOM staff to equip them with skills in handling the media (AMISOM 2010: §82).

The IST also started to produce radio shows and video documentaries to support AMISOM's activities. Examples include "Gate of Hope," "Somalia back from the brink," "AMISOM Hospital," and the "Mayor of Mogadishu." In 2014, the UPDF also produced a 23-minute film about AMISOM's successes titled "Heroes in the Horn." One particularly significant example came in 2010 when the production team produced "The Misleaders," a radio drama of ten 30-minute episodes exploring al-Shabaab's recruitment methods that aired on Radio Shabelle. A follow-up ten-episode series "Happy People Can't Be Controlled," aired on Radio Frontier during 2011 (IST 2012: 59–60). Video documentaries were also produced, usually based on material filmed by embedded reporters, for example, from the frontlines of the battle for Mogadishu in 2010 and 2011, with the KDF before the final assault on Kismayo in 2012, and clearing the road from Mogadishu to Baidoa (Interviews, IST official, 3 January 2013, former IST official, 20 July 2017).

The IST was also keen to promote a more secure environment in which journalists could work within Somalia as part of its media sector development. With sixty-two journalists killed in Somalia between 1992 and 2017, it was one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist (CPJ 2017). This goal sometimes extended to the IST helping to provide physical security to journalists. For example, the IST established the Mogadishu Media House complete with computers and Internet access as a safe house for journalists to meet, stay and work (IST 2012: 55). In another episode in 2011, the IST provided equipment and technical

support to the staff of Radio Shabelle who were trying to relocate out of an al-Shabaab-controlled part of Mogadishu (Interview, former IST official, 20 July 2017). This part of the IST project was called “Lifeline.”

The overall goal of AMISOM’s new communications strategy was: ‘To obtain broad popular support and understanding of the role of AMISOM in protecting the sovereignty, rebuilding the national institutions and safeguarding natural resources as well as to promote the implementation of the peace agreement through supporting an all inclusive Somali dialogue’ (IST 2012: 15). The IST proceeded to work on two main strands of this to reinforce the profile, credibility and legitimacy of AMISOM, and to undermine the narratives produced by ‘obstructionists’: insurgents, criminals, warlords, pirates etc. (IST 2012: 20). It also tried to ensure there was a coherent AMISOM message and that the mission’s personnel adhered to a single narrative (that challenged misconceptions) and explained their mandate and intentions to the Somali people. The IST summarized its work as an attempt to promote three principles of consistent and credible messaging, and confidence that the peace process could be reinforced through public participation and dialogue (IST 2012: 17).

The IST organized its activities to engage four clusters of target audiences (IST 2012: 21):

- Somali audiences (especially political leaders, clan leaders, displaced people, local civilians, and rebels);
- regional audiences (Somalia’s neighboring countries, other regional players, refugees, and the region’s civilian population);
- international audiences (notably the government and military of AMISOM’s TCCs, international organizations, the Somali diaspora, NGOs with a presence in Somalia and the region, and other organizations with a credible global reach); and
- internal audiences (namely, AMISOM’s leadership and spokespeople, AU

civilian staff across the region, AMISOM troops, and UN partners).

As well as outreach to media houses, particular attention was paid to ‘potential change leaders’ in each of these audiences, i.e. actors with status and respect to act as opinion leaders (IST 2012: 22).

### ***The IST’s Core Narratives and their Impact***

The IST’s core narrative about AMISOM and Somalia had several dimensions (IST 2012: 24, 25, 79, 25). First, it emphasized that the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) was a transitional mechanism ‘to prepare the way for the establishment of legitimate and accountable public institutions, which respond to the desires and aspirations of the Somali people’ (IST 2012: 24). Second, AMISOM was portrayed as representing the whole of Africa and a friend of Somalia, not an invading force. In particular, the IST promoted a narrative that AMISOM and the TFG were working in a constructive alliance to stabilize the country. In contrast, the IST depicted al-Shabaab as being controlled by foreigners linked to al-Qa’ida (IST 2012: 5). A third strand was to emphasize that AMISOM’s progress depended on continued support of its TCCs but ‘chiefly on the participation of Somalis themselves’.

For Somalis, the message was that AMISOM is here to help; for the region, AMISOM was portrayed as the natural African reaction to a fire in a neighbor’s house; and for international audiences AMISOM was depicted as having a positive effect by providing an opportunity for political dialogue but it needed additional troops and donor support (IST 2012: 26–27).

By early 2012, the IST was focused on disseminating four basic stories to support the transition from war to peace. These focused on explaining how the TFG was established and what it was trying to achieve, a story of how the security environment was improving, a story about trying to achieve a settlement and reconciliation between Somalis, and a story focused on the negative traits

and activities of what the IST called the “obstructionists” (IST 2012: 33). As one senior IST official put it, ‘We needed to change the messaging around AMISOM and Somalia: From conflict to post-conflict. From destruction to reconstruction. From failed state to emerging statehood’ (Interview, IST official, 3 January 2013).

Evidence from the IST’s own polling suggests that their efforts were not in vain. The IST initially conducted three waves of opinion polling in November 2009, October–November 2010, and December 2011 to January 2012 (IST 2012: 37–38). Using a sample of 1,150 people in Mogadishu and its environs, the three polls indicated a significant positive shift in AMISOM’s reputation (IST 2012: 81ff). In January 2010, almost one-third of Somalis polled said AMISOM was in Somalia to cause harm. By December 2011, however, this figure had dropped to 9%. This was important because until 2011, ‘the perception that AMISOM was the prime cause of civilian casualties in Mogadishu as a consequence of indiscriminate shell fire was the single most potent message deployed by Al-Shabaab, undermining much of AMISOM’s broader success both with Somalis themselves and the international community’ (IST 2012: 49). By late 2011, the IST could claim that charges of civilian casualties caused by AMISOM had ‘practically disappeared’ (IST 2012: 86).

By the end of 2012, the IST concluded that AMISOM was seen as a ‘trusted local partner’ rather than ‘a foreign occupier’ and al-Shabaab as foreign-led and al-Qa’ida-affiliated (IST 2012: 92). More generally, AMISOM was being hailed as a potential model for responding to other international crises (e.g. Freear and de Coning 2013). And yet, at the same time the strategic terrain started to shift. With AMISOM’s expansion beyond Mogadishu and the inclusion of two new TCCs (Kenya and Djibouti), the AU mission became more disjointed as it shifted into stabilization mode (Lotze and Williams 2016). And in 2013 political competition between the AU and UN began to surface and affect

the IST’s work as its staff were pulled in multiple, sometimes contradictory directions.

In addition, a fourth round of similar IST polling of 1,031 adults conducted during March and April 2013 in Mogadishu and its environs suggested that 59% felt AMISOM had been ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ effective at providing security for the local community, although surprisingly, only 844 of the 1,031 people polled had heard of AMISOM (IST 2013). Local respondents also urged AMISOM to provide more training for the Somali National Army (SNA) (mentioned by 70% of respondents) and disarm militias (43%). On the other hand, the same survey revealed only 50% of respondents viewed AMISOM as a ‘friendly force’ compared to 30% who felt it was not. Furthermore, more than half of all respondents believed Kenya (61%) and Uganda (54%) – AMISOM’s most prominent troop-contributing countries at the time – were involved in Somali affairs for their own interests rather than for the interests of Somalis (the answer in Burundi’s case was 48%, Djibouti 45%, and Sierra Leone 39%). On the positive side, similar polling conducted in October–November 2013 saw a rise in the proportion of respondents who viewed AMISOM as a friendly force – an average of 65% of respondents across Mogadishu, Beledweyne, Kismayo, Baidoa and Marka (Interview, IST official, February 2014).

### ***A Shift in Approach***

Spurred in part by the changing external environment noted above, in late 2013 a basic system of Task Order (approvals) was put in place to de-conflict the use of IST resources by the UN and AU, and to try and refocus the IST’s activities, which UNSOA thought had lost momentum in the changing environment (Interview, former UNSOA official, 3 August 2017). This perturbed some IST staff because it was seen as altering the previous arrangement where the contractors – who were the strategic communications professionals – generated the concepts of work and then implemented them, to a more stifling situation where tasks were

generated top-down (Interview, former IST official, 20 July 2017). There was also a growing sentiment that the new arrangement was intended to get the IST to do more 'crass public relations' work for the AU (Interview, former UNSOM official, 10 March 2017).

AMISOM's media operations thus came to resemble the more standard UN PIU format rather than the IST's earlier more autonomous, research-led approach. It also brought more internally-focused products and mission paraphernalia and merchandise such as AMISOM calendars, T-shirts, bags, etc. This reflected an increasing focus on production (i.e. the number of outputs became key) rather than the need to generate influence and specific political effects that reduced the risks to AMISOM's reputation with local Somalis. There was also a noticeable decrease in the number of media visits, although this usually fluctuated due to several factors, including the tempo of AMISOM operations and the new Federal Government developing its own embryonic capacity and hence the IST – which had provided accommodation, life support and security for visiting journalists – became less vital. One outside journalist, suggested that this might also have been due to the fact that AMISOM was increasingly only sharing media that independent journalists 'weren't interested in – such as your typical public relations products, ribbon-cutting, ceremonies etc. – and suppressed the things we were, often because it made them look bad, incompetent or beaten' (Tristan McConnell cited in Kriel 2017: 78).

In late 2014, the IST transitioned from the original private firms, which lost the new UN contract (Kriel 2017: 53). It was won by Aethos, a specialist communications division of Aegis Defence Services Ltd, which was then subsequently bought out in 2015 by another private security company, Garda. Despite the change in contractors, some of the personnel remained the same. For example, some senior Aethos personnel had previously worked for Bell-Pottinger/CHIME and numerous lower-ranking staff simply changed contracts. The Tasking Order

arrangement previously put in place continued under the new IST management.

Under these new arrangements, there were notable elements of both continuity and change at the IST. For example, the new team remained approximately 50-strong, maintained a predominance of Somali speaking local staff in the field, and continued to organize media and communication pre-deployment trainings for AMISOM personnel (Interview, IST official, 7 September 2017). Although 37 such trainings were conducted between December 2014 and September 2017, the challenge was to keep them regular enough to meet the demands posed by high turnover of AMISOM personnel. The IST also continued to produce official video programming, such as the 'AMISOM in Action' series examining key aspects of the mission's operations.

The approach to research products displayed elements of both continuity and change. The IST continued to compile research products as directed by AMISOM. These included assessments of the SNA, SPF, and countering al-Shabaab propaganda, as well as studies on the voices of ex-combatants and women's roles in Somali politics. It was noticeable, however, that the new arrangements saw a shift to a more centralized approach. Whereas previously, AMISOM leadership received some research products sent to them by the strategic communication advisers at IST, the new arrangement saw IST only able to respond to AMISOM's requests for communications support (Interviews, IST official, 6 September 2017; UN official, 28 September 2017). The former arrangement granted more autonomy to the strategic communications professionals to advise AMISOM.

In terms of novelty, at the strategic level, during 2015 and 2016, AMISOM (together with UNSOM) reconfigured their communication strategy based around a three-pronged campaign to push a security narrative (themed as 'Safe and Secure Somalia'), a political narrative (themed as 'Our Somalia'), and a future-state narrative (themed as



'Self-Reliant Somalia') (UNSOM-AU 2016: 10). Operationally, there were some novel advances in the social media realm with new AMISOM Facebook and Instagram accounts established. An outreach unit was also set up. This consisted of two staff operating out of the fortified Jazeera Hotel, very close to the Mogadishu International Airport. In mid-2017, the IST expanded these efforts when one Somali member of the outreach IST personnel was deployed to each of Baidoa, Beledweyne, and Kismayo (Interviews, IST official, 6 September 2017; UN official, 28 September 2017). In early 2016, the US donated to AMISOM 'Radio-In-A-Box' communication capabilities in order to broadcast pro-Federal Government, pro-AMISOM and anti-al-Shabaab content to local target communities across south-central Somalia (AMISOM 2016b). This gave AMISOM an additional form of outreach, which broadcast news messaging as well as dramas, Somali music, and talk shows featuring community call-in. AMISOM deployed the 'Radio-In-A-Box' in each sector except Kismayo, which did not implement the program (Farsight Africa Group 2017: 6, 18).

### ***A Decline in Local Support***

Despite these various initiatives, AMISOM faced a significant strategic communications problem between 2014 and 2016 as the IST's opinion polling showed that Somali public opinion of the mission had become considerably less favorable.

In polls of 2,000 Somalis from Mogadishu, Baidoa, Beledweyne and Kismayo conducted between December 2014 and February 2015, the IST found significant positive local perceptions of AMISOM (IST 2015). For example, 76% of respondents had some or a lot of 'confidence' and 80% had some or a lot of 'trust' in AMISOM military, although the statistics for AMISOM police and civilian components were considerably lower. 52% strongly or somewhat agreed that AMISOM presence would assist the Somali people to achieve peace, and over 60% felt positive that AMISOM would enable the stabilization

of Somalia. In particular, AMISOM's operations were credited with facilitating significant improvements in education (68%), the competence of the SNA (52%), freedom to use/own land (50%), and the ease of doing business (49%) (Ipsos 2015: 7). Interestingly, residents in Beledweyne felt significantly safer than those in Mogadishu, Kismayo and Baidoa. This correlated with strongly positive views of AMISOM's Djiboutian contingent, which was playing a significantly larger role in managing local disputes there than the TCCs deployed in other parts of the country. Kismayo, in contrast, with mostly Kenyan troops, had the highest proportion of dissatisfaction with AMISOM.

However, the next major survey conducted during June and July 2016 saw AMISOM's popularity significantly diminish among local civilians. This survey polled 2,306 adults in Mogadishu, Baidoa, Beledweyne, Kismayo and Garowe (Ipsos 2016; see also UNSOM-AU 2016: 26–30). The context in which it was undertaken was mixed. On the one hand, almost all the socio-economic indicators measured by the IST improved across Somalia during 2015–16, except cost of living (UNSOM-AU 2016: 3, 24). On the other, there was a significant overall decline in perceptions of security and AMISOM engaging in less constructive ways with the local population. Overall, support for AMISOM reduced by over half from 64% to 28%, and nearly half of Somali citizens polled (48%) wanted AMISOM to leave immediately.

In more detail, 62% of respondents said they received no services from AMISOM in 2016 compared to only 32% in 2014. Overall, local support for AMISOM fell significantly from 2014, when 64% of respondents had a lot or some support for AMISOM, to just 28% in the 2016 survey. There was also a drop in satisfaction of AMISOM's performance. Whereas in 2014, 64% were very or somewhat satisfied with AMISOM (with the worst figures coming from respondents in Baidoa and the best from Beledweyne), in 2016 the figure had dropped to 37% (with the worst figures coming from respondents

in Mogadishu and the best from Kismayo). Incredibly, by 2016, only 15% of respondents viewed AMISOM as friendly and 55% saw it as an unfriendly force. The worst figures (and a huge reversal from the previous year) came from Beledweyne where 64% now saw AMISOM as unfriendly and only 13% as friendly. The most positive figures this time around came from Kismayo where 22% saw AMISOM as friendly and 42% saw it as unfriendly. In 2014, 56% had seen AMISOM as a friendly force and only 14% saw it as unfriendly. This was reflected in the overall assessment that by June 2016 47% had no confidence at all in AMISOM; 30% some little confidence; and only 14% had a lot of confidence in the mission.

Similar research conducted for UNSOM confirmed these negative trends. By 2016, AMISOM was generating more negative than positive reactions from local Somalis, including the perception that despite receiving much higher remuneration, AMISOM personnel were working in 'safer' zones compared to the SNA troops who were more exposed. Criticisms over human rights abuses by AMISOM personnel also remained prominent and intensified calls for AMISOM to handover to Somali security forces (UNSOM 2016: 5, 16).

### **Key Challenges for AMISOM's Strategic Communications**

Although the IST provided AMISOM with an enormous boost to its strategic communications capacity, it also suffered from some major challenges and limitations. Indeed, one of the IST's own retrospective conclusions was that AMISOM never achieved the desired press 'rhythm' and remained essentially reactive in its approach to strategic communications (IST 2012: 106). Similarly, AMISOM itself identified a range of ongoing public information challenges. In late 2012, these were summarized as understaffing; lack of proper coordination and information-sharing; laborious statement clearance procedures that delayed information dissemination and inadequate harmonization of the

statements that were produced, the security situation, which made information-gathering very difficult; a lack of Crisis Communications guidelines; irregular media briefings; and the lack of high-level information coordination meetings since March 2011 (AMISOM 2012: Annex D, 10). In addition, AMISOM's tiny PIU bemoaned the fact that it was overshadowed by the IST. In reality, however, there was no viable route for the PIU to meet AMISOM's strategic communications needs without the IST. One senior IST official also complained that AMISOM had to operate within a rather different set of rules than al-Shabaab, which often relied on gory and gratuitous 'shock and awe' tactics in its media (Interview IST official, 6 September 2017).

Of course, probably the most fundamental challenge was the operating environment in Somalia, which was exceptionally hostile with few secure locations available for IST staff to live and operate. They ended up staying on Bancroft Global Development's facilities until a separate compound was built for them within AMISOM's main base at the Mogadishu International Airport in 2012. Security concerns also restricted the amount of activity IST personnel could undertake in the sectors beyond Mogadishu.

A second, and perhaps surprising problem was selling some of the concepts to skeptical AMISOM commanders. An early example of this challenge was the difficulty the IST faced with regard to Radio Bar-Kulan when it became apparent that some of the AU's senior leadership thought they would be getting 'Radio AMISOM'. This reflected the Ugandan primacy in AMISOM at the time and the UPDF's experience in the Ugandan bush wars, which saw strategic communications as essentially pro-AMISOM propaganda (Interview, former IST official, 20 July 2017). In Somalia, however, what was required was an impartial and credible news outlet that was balanced, which meant at times being critical of AMISOM. Indeed, Albany Associates advertised Radio Bar-Kulan as 'a trusted independent, impartial observer of affairs in the country run by Somalis'.<sup>7</sup>

This was unexpected and caused friction with some of AMISOM's senior leadership. Arguably the turning point came after al-Shabaab's failed Ramadan Offensive in August and September 2010 when IST staff embedded with AMISOM on the front-lines produced useful footage and escorted international media personalities, which eventually changed the perception of AMISOM from invaders to liberators. Overall, the IST concluded it took about a year to dispel the UPDF's initial assumptions (IST 2012: 46).

The IST found that AMISOM's civilian component was also reluctant to engage in its strategic communications plan. In one sense, the IST's relations with AMISOM force headquarters had been good in terms of access because the project lead was a senior Ugandan who had been press secretary to Yoweri Museveni during the civil war. But while AMISOM's military came around, the IST concluded that the civilian component 'remained reluctant to shoulder its responsibilities with regard to the political communications process' (IST 2012: 35). This meant the IST had to do it for them. Having the head of mission based outside of Somalia (in Nairobi) with only short trips to Mogadishu also made it harder for AMISOM to maintain consistently positive relationships with local leaders (Interviews, IST official, 3 October 2012; UPDF officer, 14 August 2012; AMISOM official, 15 August 2012).

A third set of challenges revolved around the IST's relationship with the governments of AMISOM's contributing countries. In sum, AU and UN personnel would repeatedly contend with AMISOM TCCs pursuing their own, national communications goals, which often ignored the IST's advice. This was particularly apparent on information related to casualties (both locals and peacekeepers). Several dimensions of this challenge arose. First, as noted above, the military forces initially displayed a limited understanding of strategic communications. As a result, when they did deploy national media teams to their sectors, they tended to only produce news that was focused on their own country. This was to be

expected but it should not have come at the expense of strategic engagement with other audiences. It also reflected the wider tendency of the TCC contingent commanders to report back to their home capitals rather than through the AMISOM force headquarters.

Especially in the first few years, there was also a problem of considerable mistrust of the local Somali population, which meant local IST staff were often excluded from entering AMISOM camps (Interview, former IST official, 20 July 2017). Since the IST first established a presence in AMISOM's sectors, these personnel had been Somali staff (Interview, UN official, 28 September 2017).

Another dimension of this challenge was noted by prominent Somali intellectual, Faisal Roble, who argued there was a tension between AMISOM's stated agenda of improving Somali governance and the fact that most of its TCCs (with the exception of Kenya and Sierra Leone) were run by autocratic regimes. There was an apparent contradiction, he argued, between AMISOM acting to 'steward Somalia to democracy' while its 'Godfather' – Ugandan President Museveni – 'believes only in one party democracy!' (Roble 2013). In some emergency cases, the IST had to try and build AMISOM's reputation as a source of credible information while some of its TCCs were caught lying. This was particularly apparent in relation to casualties and illicit trading of commodities. As veteran British journalist Tristan McConnell, who covered al-Shabaab for more than a decade put it: 'the tendency of Kenya in particular to lie in its press statements means that we've reached the thoroughly disheartening situation in which the terrorists seem more honest than the government' (cited in Kriel 2017: 70). Al-Shabaab's media products frequently highlighted the Kenyan government's lies. But the IST had only very limited contact, coordination and influence over the KDF since they were often reluctant to accept any of the IST's advice (Interview, former UNSOA official, 3 August 2017). This situation persisted, as was evident in the Kenyan government's incoherent media response to the

battles at its bases at El Adde in January 2016 and Kulbiyow in January 2017 (see Williams 2016).

It was also noted that the example set by the United States on some of these issues did not help. As journalist Robyn Kriel noted, there tended to be intense secrecy about US strikes against al-Shabaab, which had taken place for over a decade and were often left unexplained. There was also little willingness to reveal any video footage from strikes as was done elsewhere, including Iraq, Pakistan and Syria (Kriel 2017: 74–75). This reinforced the view of AMISOM TCCs that operational security should override strategic communications and they remained secretive about various aspects of their operations. As the IST acknowledged, probably more than any other issue, debates over acknowledging military casualties ‘led to serious issues of credibility’ (IST 2012: 56).

The unhelpful attitude of some of the TCCs was also reflected in the limited media training available to most AMISOM personnel, especially in the early years. Although the IST continued to provide pre-deployment and some other media and communications trainings, it also regularly identified the need for more and better training as a weakness. As noted in AMISOM’s 2013 Strategic Directive, ‘Ensuring that accurate information about the mandate, objectives and operations of AMISOM is disseminated as widely as possible, both within Somalia and beyond, is important with regards to ensuring the success of AMISOM operations and the attainment of the mandate of the Mission’ (AMISOM 2013: section 19g). And yet numerous mission personnel continued to make mistakes and there was little evidence of AMISOM’s military component seriously buying into such declarations.

In early 2013, for example, one of AMISOM’s key spokespeople had no prior training in this area (Interview, UK military adviser to AMISOM, 28 February 2014). Probably the most infamous case occurred in March 2014 when a Burundian officer

was quoted in local Somali media as saying ‘I don’t want to defeat Al-Shabaab. I would rather scatter them to prolong my mission’ (Abdisamad 2014). Widely broadcast across Somali radio and other media sources, this gave the impression that AMISOM peacekeepers did not want their mission to succeed until they had made enough money to build their houses or buy cars back home. IST officials also noted that the quality of media training varied across contributing countries. It was implemented first for Uganda, then Burundi, and then expanded to the other TCCs. While the UPDF pre-deployment package was generally praised, the performance of KDF officers came in for considerable criticism (Interviews, Ugandan journalist, 15 August 2012; IST official, 3 October 2012).

The IST also faced several organizational challenges. Like most international actors operating in Somalia, it suffered at times from a lack of resources, a high turnover of personnel, and the inappropriate hiring of professionals who ‘lacked cultural understanding, linguistics but also those with insight into the Somali culture’ (Stephen Harley cited in Kriel 2017: 72–73). The IST’s research component, for instance, struggled to produce consistently reliable and accurate products intended to help senior leaders better understand the operating environment. But while this was partly a problem of limited resources, it was also due to insecurity, and perhaps most fundamentally to the complexity of Somalia’s clan dynamics and the shifting alliances between different armed actors. For example, even after ten years, the AU, UN and even the Federal Government did not have an accurate list of who was in the Somali National Army! There was also some controversy about the lack of Africans in senior management roles with British ex-media, ex-armed forces and ex-political communications personnel predominant (Interview, UNSOM official, 10 March 2017).

These challenges and limitations generated missed opportunities to damage al-Shabaab’s

brand. To take just two examples, in 2011, one visiting journalist reported on how AMISOM missed a good chance to exploit evidence of al-Shabaab's regular references to sexual imagery and its abuse of women.<sup>8</sup> In one captured al-Shabaab position, AMISOM troops found 'the walls covered with doodles of the most obscene type,' including scenes of rape, bestiality and half-man, half-beast depictions not usually associated with pious Islamists. The discovery prompted one UN official to joke that 'to neutralize al-Shabaab as a fighting force, all AMISOM needed to do was to fly in two planeloads of prostitutes from Bangkok and ferry them up to the front' (Fergusson 2013: 117).

Another more recent example came in 2016 when the UN Secretary-General documented that al-Shabaab had been recruiting and using children to fight in some of their bloodiest battles (Kriel 2017: 62–63). Despite being given ample time to respond to the story, it took two weeks for AMISOM to formulate a counter-message (AMISOM 2016a). As Robyn Kriel (2017) argued, this was a perfect occasion for AMISOM to paint al-Shabaab as cowards who pushed young children out front to fight their battles, but the opportunity was missed. One former IST official concluded that such lost opportunities reflected a broader and 'consistent failure to message in any way against al-Shabaab's high-profile attacks. There is no preparatory work in terms of reporting suspicions, no rapid response messaging once the incident starts [and] no follow-up messaging to clarify what happened' (Stephen Harley cited in Kriel 2017: 86–87).

## Lessons

The preceding analysis suggests that there was no viable route for AMISOM's tiny PIU to meet the mission's strategic communications needs. Without the IST, AMISOM would have had almost zero capabilities in this area. Moreover, as part of the IST's broader strategic communications strategy, polling evidence and broader debates about AMISOM in Addis Ababa, New York, Brussels and Washington

DC suggest that its work helped shift the tide against al-Shabaab's initially dominant narrative.

As circumstances changed, however, so AMISOM's strategic communications needed to evolve as the nature of the threat from al-Shabaab altered, as the mission brought on more TCCs, as the new Federal Government of Somalia started to establish its own, albeit embryonic, strategic communications, and as the UN established a more significant field presence in Somalia. Despite the challenges and shortcomings discussed above, the IST played an innovative and important function for AMISOM. With an expanded UN mission authorized in 2013 and the shift into more of a stabilization mode from 2014, the terrain had shifted. This put a premium on supporting the Somali authorities, which, like other components of AMISOM, had not been the IST's priority.

Arguably the most basic lesson is that deploying a peace operation without the capabilities to wage an effective strategic communications campaign is a major error. To ensure this is not repeated, the AU needs a standing strategic communications capability equipped to develop policy and plans, build coherence, as well as support robust communications operations in all its peace operations. Naturally, the precise nature of the strategic communications capabilities should be constituted in accordance with the needs on the ground.

A second lesson is to ensure coherence between a clear vision and sound policy to guide strategic communications. The mission leadership should clearly articulate the desired effects and clarify how particular audiences can be influenced to support the mission's goals. Moreover, as seen in AMISOM's case, it is not enough to devise a coherent policy; it must also be implemented by the countries contributing to the mission. To be effective also means building trust and remaining credible. Here, the issue of casualties (both civilians harmed by AMISOM and the mission's own casualties) most clearly demonstrated how the absence of a coherent

policy between the AU and the mission's TCCs could have a disastrous impact on strategic communications. It was therefore unsurprising that the IST sometimes struggled to build trust both with some of the mission's contingents and with local Somali audiences.

A third lesson is that effective strategic communications in AMISOM required an expeditionary mindset and a willingness to take risks, including to generate and support media access in difficult circumstances. Like UNSOA's operations with regard to logistics, this could only plausibly be delivered in the early years by a contractor capability rather than a standard UN format PIU. And like UNSOA, the IST's experience demonstrates that in such an insecure and fluid environment as Somalia, contractual arrangements need to build in flexibility and a willingness to take some risks. In this case, the IST was initially designed to ensure a strategically focused and decentralized approach to project design, which was subsequently curtailed from 2013. But given the need to learn and evolve quickly on the job, the ability to take risks was crucial.

Finally, a related lesson is that the need for expertise about local conflict dynamics means that IST-like operations probably need a predominantly local team in order to ensure sustainable success. The challenge facing AMISOM early on was the absence of a Somali commercial capability able to manage an effort of the scope, scale, and complexity of the IST (Interview, former UNSOA official, 3 August 2017). The situation improved over time and the IST maintained over 50% local staff. But it remained difficult to hire and retain the best people and the issue was sometimes complicated by AMISOM's initial mistrust of Somalis, which often raised practical obstacles to running an effective campaign such as the inability to co-locate.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> AMISOM's mandated tasks have evolved well beyond the realm of peacekeeping, including VIP protection, war-fighting, counterinsurgency, stabilization, and state-building as well as supporting

electoral processes and facilitating humanitarian assistance. For a detailed history of the mission see Williams 2018.

- <sup>2</sup> Once established, project management of Radio Bar-Kulan was handed to Albany and Okapi Consulting dropped out of the consortium.

- <sup>3</sup> It also provided some support for the UN in Somalia and also the Federal Government, for instance by providing vital equipment to the Ministry of Information to support Radio Mogadishu.

- <sup>4</sup> See [www.bar-kulan.com](http://www.bar-kulan.com).

- <sup>5</sup> See [www.amisom-au.org](http://www.amisom-au.org).

- <sup>6</sup> See [www.Somali-media.org](http://www.Somali-media.org) and [www.somaliamediamonitoring.org](http://www.somaliamediamonitoring.org) respectively.

- <sup>7</sup> Albany Associates, <http://www.albanyassociates.com/projects/somalia> [accessed 25 July 2017].

- <sup>8</sup> Al-Shabaab fighters regularly committed acts of sexual violence and abuse, including against children. See, for example, UN documents A/70/836-S/2016/360, 20 April 2016, §116, §118; S/2017/249, 15 April 2017, §55–56.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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