



Seven Priorities for the African Union in 2018

Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°135

Addis Ababa/Nairobi/Brussels, 17 January 2018

What's the issue? African Union leaders meet at the end of January for their bi-annual summit. Vital institutional and financial reform will likely be at the top of the AU's 2018 agenda, but the organisation must ensure that its implementation does not draw focus away from conflict prevention and resolution.

Why does it matter? The African conflict landscape has changed: new threats, especially from transnational jihadist and criminal networks, aggravate more traditional forms of conflict. The geopolitical climate has become even harder to navigate. And elections, often the trigger for political crisis and violence, will take place in eighteen African countries in 2018.

What should be done? The AU must pay particular attention to Africa's most dire conflicts and those where it can have real impact: South Sudan, Central African Republic and Somalia. As a priority, it should advance preparations for elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo and deploy observations teams early in Cameroon, Mali and Zimbabwe.

Overview

2018 could be a year of dramatic change for the African Union (AU) as it pursues an extensive program of institutional and financial reform. At the end of January, Rwanda's President Paul Kagame – the author and chief supervisor of the process – takes over as chairperson of the AU Assembly, the organisation's highest decision-making body, meaning that reform will rise to the top of the AU's agenda. The changes are critical for the organisation's long-term health, but driving them through will not be quick or easy. Kagame, working closely with AU Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat, should ensure their implementation does not sap too much energy from the AU's other vital work, especially continental conflict prevention and resolution.

Faki himself, since taking office in March 2017, has focused squarely on peace and security, in strong contrast to his predecessor, Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, who tried to reorient the organisation toward long-term development. During his first week in office, Faki visited Somalia, where an AU force is battling Al-Shabaab's resilient insurgency. In his second, he travelled to South Sudan, scene of the continent's deadliest conflict. These visits, together with subsequent ones to the Democratic Republic

of Congo (DRC) and the G5 Sahel states (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger), provide a strong indication of where Faki believes the AU's gravest peace and security challenges lie.

Additionally, he has worked to strengthen relations with the AU's two most important strategic partners – the UN and the European Union (EU). In April, he signed the long-delayed Joint UN-AU Framework for Enhanced Cooperation on Peace and Security, which should improve collaboration between the two organisations. Faki was instrumental in repairing relations with the EU, which had reached a low point in 2016 due to disputes over payments to troops in the AU mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Discussions ahead of November's AU-EU summit suggest a cooperation agreement, similar to that between the AU and the UN, is likely to be adopted in 2018. The joint AU-EU-UN task force on migration, born out of disgust with migrant slave auctions in Libya, is a positive development that capitalises on each institution's strengths. As the AU re-evaluates its partnerships with other multilateral organisations and non-African states in 2018, it should build on these successes and not neglect relations with the EU and UN.

The geopolitical climate, already challenging when Faki took office in March, has become still harder to navigate. Tensions between Gulf powers – notably between Saudi Arabia and its allies on the one hand and Qatar on the other – have spilled into the Horn of Africa, adding to instability in Somalia and exacerbating friction over the Nile between Egypt and Ethiopia, which have adopted different positions on the dispute. Divisions between major powers on the UN Security Council makes achieving consensus on crises, including those in Africa, ever harder. While U.S. President Donald Trump has largely ignored Africa, his administration's escalating counter-terrorism operations risk further complicating crises in Somalia and the Sahel absent more comprehensive U.S. support for peace efforts.

With many competing peace and security concerns, the AU should focus on Africa's most dire crises and those where the continental body or its representatives have useful roles to play. With this in mind, this note lays out priorities for the AU in 2018. These include the important reform efforts; limiting any disruption to the institution's work caused by friction between Morocco and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic's (SADR); helping resolve or avert election-related crises in the DRC, Cameroon, Mali and Zimbabwe; and managing conflicts in the Central African Republic, Somalia and South Sudan.

Strategic Direction

1. Build consensus on institutional and financial reform

The AU has embarked on a potentially radical reform process, which if fully implemented could prove as significant as the 2002 transformation of the Organisation of African Unity into the African Union. Current reforms, spearheaded by Kagame at the behest of the Assembly, aim to reduce the AU's focus to just four areas: peace and security; political affairs; the establishment of a continental free trade area; and voice and representation in global affairs. Integral to this process, which should make the organisation leaner and more efficient, is increased financial self-sufficiency. In 2012,

when the AU was at its most dependent, member states funded just 3 per cent of its programmatic budget. By 2017, this had increased to 14 per cent, still well short of member states' July 2015 commitment to finance 75 per cent of the AU's programs by 2020, plus 25 per cent of its peace and security activities and all of its spending on operational and administrative costs. Extra resources are to be raised through a 0.2 per cent levy on "all eligible" goods imported to the continent under a plan drawn up by Donald Kaberuka, the AU High Representative for the Peace Fund.

2018 is a pivotal year for these reforms. At the end of January, Kagame takes over from President Alpha Condé of Guinea as Assembly chairperson, and is widely expected to use his year at the helm to push through the agenda he developed, endorsed by his fellow leaders at the January 2017 AU summit. Member states, the Commission and the regional economic communities (RECs) have expressed disappointment with the process to date, however, citing a lack of consultation. Reforms could be derailed without a more inclusive and collaborative approach.

In particular, Kagame must allay the apprehensions of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which has laid out a comprehensive list of concerns including the practicality of the 0.2 per cent import tax, the reduced role of the Permanent Representatives Committee comprising member states' ambassadors to the AU, and the establishment of a troika of current, outgoing and incoming Assembly chairpersons to represent the AU at summits with partners. He must also win over the five biggest contributors to the AU budget – Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa – all of which have serious doubts about the financial reforms, among other proposals. To do this, Kagame will have to build and mobilise a coalition of supportive states, drawn from each sub-region, to win over sceptics. He and Faki should consider joint visits to the secretariats of each AU-recognised REC or attend their respective summits to explain the benefits of reform. Member states will need time to undertake domestic consultations, particularly regarding the 0.2 per cent levy on imports, which will require ratification by parliament or other local authorities in many countries.

As part of the reform process, the AU should undertake a wholesale review of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). The continental conflict landscape has evolved dramatically since APSA was designed and developed in the early 2000s. New challenges have emerged, including the expanding influence of non-state actors, especially jihadist movements and criminal networks that operate across borders and often exploit and aggravate more traditional forms of conflict. The AU has endorsed the ad-hoc forces that groups of states have mobilised in response – the Multinational Joint Task Force to combat Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin and G5 Sahel Joint Force – but exercises little, if any, oversight over their mandate or operations. A review of APSA would consider whether these forces should be brought into continental structures and, if so, how.

2. Limit disruption caused by tensions between Morocco and SADR

Morocco rejoined the AU in January 2017, after 33 years of self-imposed exile, a protest against the admission of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Algeria and several other states strongly opposed Rabat's return on the grounds that its "occupation" of SADR contravenes AU principles. Many believe Morocco will attempt

to isolate and eventually expel SADR from the AU and fear its presence could be disruptive: before rejoining, Morocco staged walkouts during several international meetings attended by SADR representatives. In his debut speech to the AU Assembly, King Mohammed VI attempted to reassure fellow leaders. “We have absolutely no intention of causing division, as some would like to insinuate”, he said, adding: “[The Kingdom’s] action will, on the contrary, help bring about unity and progress”.

Despite his assurances, tensions between Morocco and SADR have already disrupted the AU’s work, delaying or derailing both internal meetings and those with external partners. In August 2017, during a ministerial meeting of the Tokyo International Conference on African Development in Maputo, Mozambique, the Moroccan foreign minister was prevented from taking part after he protested against SADR’s inclusion, a dispute that degenerated into a physical altercation. During preparations for November’s AU-EU summit, a great deal of time and political goodwill was expended convincing Morocco to take its seat, though the king eventually participated fully, in large part because of the importance of the partnership with the EU to both Morocco and Africa as a whole.

Member states and AU Commission staff are increasingly frustrated with both sides; they will need to exercise deft diplomacy to ease frictions. Faki should work with allies among member states to persuade Morocco, SADR and their respective supporters to allow the AU to work unhindered. Warmer relations between Pretoria and Rabat may help; the two countries agreed to exchange ambassadors after King Mohammed VI and President Jacob Zuma met on the sidelines of the AU-EU summit.

Contested Transitions

3. Help advance preparations for elections in the DRC

In 2017, President Joseph Kabila extended his tenure in power at least until the end of 2018, despite the December 2016 Saint Sylvester agreement, which required elections to be held in December 2017. The opposition and civil society, meanwhile, continue to struggle to forge a credible popular movement in the face of continued repression. Kabila retains the upper hand, controlling the government, the security forces and the electoral commission. For now, there is no guarantee or discernible commitment to the effective organisation of elections. The deadly 31 December crackdown on protesters demonstrates that political repression continues unabated, reinforcing concerns that electoral preparations are a smokescreen.

The Congolese economy is in crisis, however, and the government’s writ is weak in large areas of the country. A number of provinces suffer local insurrections or inter-communal conflict, resulting in one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises. The danger that violence could escalate further remains high: the experience in Kasai, where politicisation of a local chief’s installation led to conflict affecting several provinces, illustrates how quickly unrest can spread. The recent killing of fifteen UN peacekeepers in Beni is also a stark reminder of the dangerous dynamics in eastern DRC.

International engagement has been lacklustre and incoherent, even as Kabila’s government has wilfully broken the Saint Sylvester provisions. The U.S. and the EU

have been more critical, imposing targeted sanctions on key officials. The AU, meanwhile, like many of its member states, denounces sanctions. Some African leaders express frustration with Kabila in private, but their tacit public support has given his government breathing space.

The electoral commission has rescheduled presidential, legislative and provincial polls for 23 December 2018. This provides an opportunity for concerted and coordinated Western and African diplomacy based on strict adherence to the new timetable, a credible vote, an opening up of political space and a guarantee that the constitution will not be amended to allow Kabila another term. The opposition should actively engage in the electoral process.

The AU, which has stepped-up its diplomacy on the DRC in recent months, could use the new electoral calendar as the basis for sustained engagement to bridge divides between Africa and the West. Together with regional actors (in particular SADC, South Africa and Angola) and the wider international community, the AU should monitor the electoral commission's progress to avoid further delays and uphold the key principles of the Saint Sylvester agreement.

A small but representative envoy group, comprised of Western and African nations and organisations, including the AU, could help forge international consensus and limit Kabila's opportunities for forum shopping. This group should establish and monitor benchmarks for the electoral process and connect initiatives at the local, regional and international levels. Finally, the AU should use its own influence and legitimacy, especially that of the Peace and Security Council, to nudge the Kabila administration toward a transition and the opposition toward engaging in the electoral process.

4. Deploy observation teams well in advance of other critical elections

In addition to the DRC, seventeen other African countries are scheduled to hold presidential, parliamentary or local elections in 2018. Of these, at least thirteen are embroiled in or emerging from conflict or have a history of recurrent electoral strife. Flawed or violent polls, or a series of votes that provoke political crises, could have wider implications for democracy and stability on the continent, parts of which already show signs of backsliding.

The AU's chronically understaffed and underfinanced Department for Political Affairs cannot effectively monitor all these contests; it should concentrate efforts on those most requiring scrutiny. In addition to short-term teams that monitor polling and counting, the AU should deploy long-term observers, ideally at least six months in advance, to keep track of broader conditions for elections and the campaign environment; unfair conditions are frequently created well in advance of polling. The AU could also consider combining its observation operations with those of regional economic communities.

Three polls, aside from those in the DRC, merit particular attention in 2018:

Cameroon faces a growing Anglophone crisis in the south west, which the government, already struggling with Boko Haram in the Far North and militias from the Central African Republic in the east, appears ill-equipped to defuse. Unrest in Anglophone areas shows signs of an incipient insurgency and could ignite a wider political

crisis that risks disrupting elections scheduled for October. The AU and other international actors should push both the government and Anglophone militants toward dialogue and promote conditions for a credible vote.

Presidential, National Assembly and regional elections are scheduled in **Mali**, but implementation of the June 2015 Algerian-brokered peace agreement remains slow. Armed groups have proliferated, clashing more frequently with Malian and international forces. The government remains largely absent across the north and jihadist groups are consolidating control across many rural areas. Unrest has also spread to central Mali, a region long-neglected by the state. Under these conditions, administering a credible vote in 2018 will be difficult. But the elections should go ahead: popular discontent with the current administration is high and any attempt to postpone them, especially presidential polls, could fuel protests, particularly in the capital Bamako. The AU should assist Malian authorities' electoral preparations, including encouraging either the UN and EU to support an audit of the voter register.

In **Zimbabwe**, the euphoria that followed President Robert Mugabe's ouster subsided as his replacement, Emmerson Mnangagwa, consolidated the power of Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the military, appointing a cabinet filled with supporters and senior army officials rather than building a broader-based coalition. At his inauguration, President Mnangagwa pledged that elections, which must be held before September 2018, will be free and fair but said nothing about the reforms needed to ensure a credible vote. The AU, working in concert with SADC, should push the government to clean up the voters' roll, establish independent oversight of the Zimbabwean Electoral Commission and create a political environment free from violence, intimidation and propaganda. The SADC Electoral Advisory Council should undertake an assessment of electoral conditions and the AU should deploy long-term observers immediately. Both institutions should also lobby the Zimbabwean government to allow regional and international groups to observe the elections. ZANU-PF and Mnangagwa have an interest in letting observers monitor the process: without scrutiny, a new government would struggle to prove it has the legitimacy needed for donors and international financial institutions to support Zimbabwe's economic recovery.

Major Crises

5. Implement the new AU roadmap in Central African Republic

The crisis in the Central African Republic (CAR) worsened during 2017, with violence causing many civilian casualties and massive displacement. Outside of the capital Bangui, most of the country is in the hands of armed groups, fighting over resources in shifting configurations of alliances. In the north west, violence mostly revolves around competing armed groups and perennial conflicts over the movement of cattle, while in the centre and east, groups are waging guerrilla war over zones of influence and resources. Stabilisation is unlikely in the short term and a military victory over the armed groups even less so. Prospects for the resumption of a broader civil war cannot be dismissed.

So far, the government and its international partners have been unable to stem the unrest or find lasting solutions to widespread violence. Effective mediation between armed groups and the state will require not only dialogue, but also pressure, particularly by squeezing income streams and exercising stronger military deterrence, including making cities weapons-free and arresting the organisers of major attacks. The national authorities must also rebuild trust in the peripheries, for example by addressing concerns of some communities over citizenship.

Various international and regional actors or organisations launched parallel mediation efforts in 2016 and the first half of 2017. Yet divergent agendas, institutional rivalries and differing approaches sent inconsistent messages, notably regarding amnesties for rebel leaders, the integration of combatants into the army and the return to CAR of former presidents. Although the AU took the lead and produced a new Roadmap for Peace and Reconciliation in July 2017, intended to promote dialogue and establish an agreement to disarm combatants, little progress has been made since. If the initiative is to succeed, the AU Commission, the Peace and Security Council and Special Representative Bédializoun Moussa Nébié, as well as CAR's neighbours, must step up their engagement, in particular by pushing armed group leaders and the government to negotiate. The AU should also commit the requisite human and financial resources, ensuring that its liaison office is fully staffed and equipped.

The AU should also iron out points of disagreement – notably over amnesties and the appointment of rebel leaders to lucrative state positions – among CAR's international partners, who have generally welcomed the recent AU initiative. Any eventual deal between the government and armed groups will require guarantors drawn from African and Western states, continental and regional organisations and the UN. A framework through which donors and others can lend political and financial support is also essential. Identifying options ahead of time would be useful. Central Africans' ownership of the process is vital to its success, so the AU will also have to secure greater buy-in from the government.

6. Avert a precipitous withdrawal from Somalia

2017 was a turbulent year for Somalia. Euphoria and optimism followed the February election of Mohammed Abdullahi "Farmajo" as president, only for the country to suffer the deadliest terrorist attack in its history when twin truck bombings in Mogadishu killed at least 500 people in October. The bombings illustrate the challenges confronting Farmajo's administration: national security forces are chronically weak while the Al-Shabaab insurgency shows continued potency and resilience, recently recapturing territory outside Mogadishu. Farmajo also contends with longstanding clan disputes and his government's mounting friction with federal states, exacerbated by the Gulf crisis. Nor has his administration made much headway in tackling the chronic governance deficits that underpin Somalia's instability.

Little suggests Al-Shabaab will be defeated any time soon, despite the gathering pace of an AMISOM military offensive in southern Somalia, backed by U.S. airstrikes. The AU mission, itself underfunded, suffers from low troop morale and is scheduled to pull out by the end of 2020. That date poses an acute dilemma for the AU and Somalia's other foreign partners. The drawdown, which started in December 2017

with the departure of 1,000 soldiers from all troop-contributing countries, is a political imperative. Yet a precipitous withdrawal would almost certainly open the door to Al-Shabaab gains, including its potential recapture of Mogadishu, given the Somali National Army's chronic weakness and corruption. The AU Commission could consider convening a summit in early 2018 that would bring together troop contributors, donors, regional bodies and the UN with the aim of improving coordination, especially regarding security forces' training and assistance. It is critical not to rush the draw-down and to coordinate with the Somali government and allies involved in security sector reform.

The looming withdrawal comes at a time of heightened tension between Mogadishu and the Somalia's federal regions. During the 2017 Gulf crisis Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) put intense pressure on Farmajo to pick sides by breaking diplomatic relations with Qatar. His attempts to steer a neutral course – the Saudis, Emiratis, Qataris and Qatar's main international ally, Turkey, all provide critical aid to Somalia – led the UAE to ramp up support and appeal directly to federal governments, as a counterweight to Mogadishu, thus aggravating friction between those governments and Farmajo and fuelling political factionalism.

7. Help reshape South Sudan's stabilisation strategy

South Sudan's failed Christmas cessation of hostilities was a stark reminder of how intractable the country's conflicts remain. Although fighting has diminished from its height in early 2014, violence remains pervasive. Government forces have the military upper hand, but though fewer regions suffer active combat, much of the country still exists in a state between war and peace: poverty, violence and displacement are constant challenges.

In 2017, the transitional government, led by President Salva Kiir, embarked on a disjointed stabilisation strategy that focused on: reshaping the 2015 regionally-mediated peace agreement in its favour; launching discreet negotiations with rebel groups coupled with military pressure to induce their acceptance of peace on Juba's terms; and organising a national dialogue. Through this strategy, Kiir successfully shifted from an internationally-monitored forum to a government-led, domestic approach, free from unwelcome external oversight. Neighbouring countries have provided quiet support, largely ending their assistance to rebel groups, but Western governments remain opposed to what they see as Juba's efforts to shape a victor's peace.

The limited gains from this strategy, which include peace agreements with more than 10,000 armed rebels, are now at risk. Under pressure from the Troika (Norway, the UK and the U.S.), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD, the sub-regional body that mediated the 2015 agreement) began a revitalisation forum to resuscitate the peace accord through a renewed ceasefire and by amending agreed timelines, specifically delaying elections set for 2018. The government has responded to international pressure by elevating less compromising and more bellicose voices within its ranks. Preserving the few advances made and preventing further deterioration should still be possible, though it will require serious political engagement.

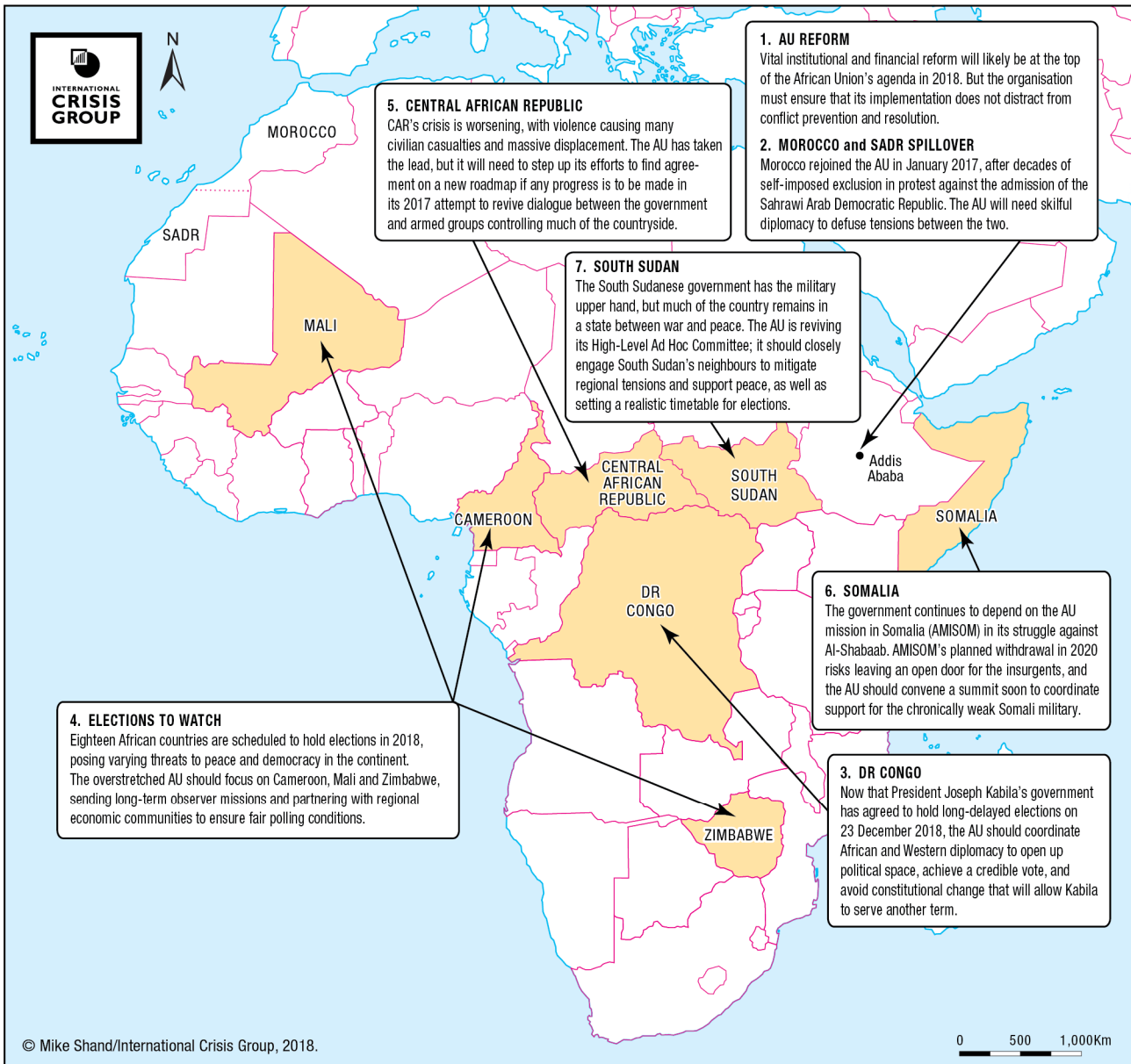
Irrespective of other factors, the transitional government controls most of the country and must be encouraged to promote peace and improve living conditions.

However, Western governments have been reluctant to engage Kiir and IGAD has focused on preventing regional conflict. This opens an opportunity for the AU to support, shape and transmit difficult messages to the transitional government – publicly and privately – about revising its stabilisation strategy and setting a realistic timetable for elections. Alpha Oumar Konaré, the AU’s High Representative, is perceived as neutral, has a good rapport with Kiir and is capable of delivering hard truths that could push him toward more moderate positions. But Konaré’s engagement has been inconsistent. Sustained involvement, including more frequent visits to Juba, would increase his ability to influence events in South Sudan.

The AU is reviving its High-Level Ad Hoc Committee on South Sudan, known informally as the AU5, which comprises Algeria, Chad, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Africa. The AU5 should engage closely with South Sudan’s neighbours in leader-to-leader talks, ensuring a balance between mitigating regional tensions and supporting peace in South Sudan. The AU5, in conjunction with Konaré, should also consider engaging Kiir on his government’s strategy. This would require them to connect high-level discussions abroad with local ones on the ground. To do this effectively both Konaré and the AU5 will need full-time staff able to travel frequently throughout South Sudan.

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Appendix A: Map for the African Union's Priorities 2018



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

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January 2018



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