

Gravitating toward the Middle East: How Sudan's changing regional context fuels conflict and hinders mediation

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GRAVITATING TOWARD THE MIDDLE EAST: HOW SUDAN'S CHANGING REGIONAL CONTEXT FUELS CONFLICT AND HINDERS MEDIATION

Øystein H. Rolandsen & Antoni Sastre Bel | May 2025

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Introduction

In April 2023, a set of low-intensity subnational conflicts in Sudan's peripheries morphed into a nation-wide civil war between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) – the long-standing regular army of Sudan – and the government militia known as the Rapid Support Force (RSF). The war has caused extensive displacement and suffering. It has also acquired significant regional dimensions. Egypt, Turkey and Iran have sided with SAF, while the RSF is supported by the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The involvement of these regional actors indicates how Sudan has politically and strategically gravitated away from the African political context toward the Middle East.

A multitude of mediation efforts have had limited results, and negotiations currently are centering on conflict mitigation and limiting the humanitarian impact of the violence, rather than reaching a comprehensive and permanent peace agreement. Peacemaking has been influenced by Sudan's reorientation toward the Middle East. Whereas the African Union (AU) and the Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have historically been the main mediators for Sudan's domestic conflicts, mediation in the current war has been dominated by ad hoc initiatives involving Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Turkey.

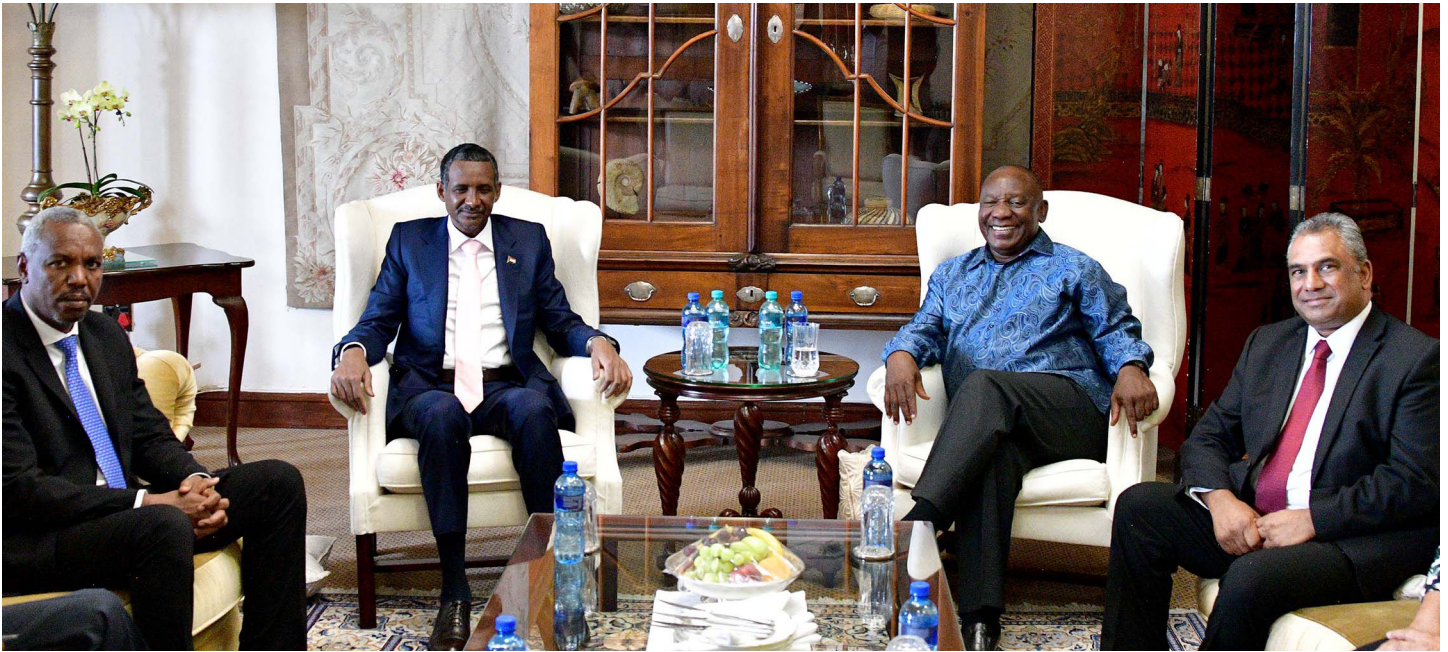


Refugees fleeing the Sudan war **Credit:** Africa Center for Strategic Studies, National Defense University

This paper provides an overview of conflict dynamics, regional actors and mediation efforts regarding the current war. It focuses on challenges related to the involvement of regional powers and examines how the regional dimensions have been addressed (or not) in mediation efforts. Our key observations are that the involvement of the Middle Eastern powers has brought new interests, ambitions and grievances into play in Sudan, bolstered the Sudanese military actors vis-à-vis civilian politicians and activists, and complicated efforts to end the conflict. It has increased the difficulty of building a united diplomatic front to force the warring parties to compromise and has strengthened the centrifugal forces threatening to tear Sudan apart permanently.

Conflict dynamics and external actor interests

Several structural and political factors that contributed to the outbreak of war can be traced back in the preceding years of instability and Sudan's long-standing economic and social tensions.¹ However, a central prerequisite for the outbreak of violence was the belligerent parties' pre-war ties to various countries in the region and the willingness of these countries to support the parties diplomatically and militarily.



President Cyril Ramaphosa meets with Rapid Support Forces General Mohamed Dagalo *Photo: GCIS / Flickr*

The background to the current conflict was the civil war in Darfur in the early 2000s, and the 2005 ending of two decades of civil war in what were then Sudan's southern provinces. South Sudan's independence in 2011 re-ignited insurgencies based on unresolved grievances in the southern peripheries of Sudan, while low-level violence continued in Darfur.² Concurrently, Sudan refocused its economy from oil production to gold mining, which has become a critical factor in the current civil war in terms of financing the hostilities, military objectives and the involvement of external parties.

The RSF originated in local government militias - often referred to as Janjaweed – established during the Darfur conflict, which were later formalized into a government paramilitary force.³ The RSF leadership forged links with the UAE, which was the main recipient of the gold illegally smuggled from the Western parts of Sudan. This became a source of significant revenue for the RSF and its leaders. Moreover, RSF personnel have participated in the Yemen and Libya conflicts to advance the UAE's interests.⁴ The UAE was therefore a well-established economic and military partner of the RSF before the Sudan war started in 2023. This alliance gave the RSF an independent platform of power and weaponry it could use to contest control of the Sudanese state.

Public protests in late 2018 and early 2019 resulted in the SAF and the RSF overthrowing the dictatorial president Hassan Omar-al-Bashir.⁵ The protests were related to increased public dissatisfaction over political suppression, violent conflicts in the peripheries and economic hardship. Later in 2019, as a result of AU and Ethiopian mediation, a broad array of civilian political forces formed a coalition that shared power with the military groups in a post-coup transitional government. The coalition broke down, however, partly because of the civilian leaders' demand that the two militaries phase out their involvement in civilian politics and the economic sector.

In October 2021 the RSF and SAF ousted the civilians from the coalition. However, tensions increased between the two armies over several issues, including SAF's intensified cooperation with Islamists from the former Bashir regime; the terms on which the RSF should be integrated into the SAF; and the position of its leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemeti"), in the military hierarchy.⁶

On April 15, 2023, the war between the RSF and SAF started in Khartoum and several other places around Sudan, especially in Darfur where RSF had its stronghold. The SAF moved its headquarters to Port Sudan where it set up a provisional government that claims to manage Sudan's formal international sovereignty. Provided the parties continue to acquire substantial amounts of weapons and ammunition supplies, neither is likely to win an outright victory. Still, the war cannot be considered a stalemate since the frontlines have not solidified and both parties hope that the strategic environment will change and make victory achievable. Another characteristic of the current conflict, which mirrors past dynamics, is the proliferation of local armed groups that align with one or neither of the belligerents. This multipolarity also raises the possibility of further fragmentation and chaos.

Violence against civilians has been massive, both in terms of collateral damage and in overt targeting of populations believed to be sympathetic to other warring parties. There are reports of atrocities that can be considered as war crimes, and the UN has accused SAF and RSF of weaponizing starvation.⁷ The conflict has led to the world's largest humanitarian catastrophe with 11 million internally displaced, 3 million refugees, 24 million people in acute need of food and 1.5 million facing famine.⁸ Estimates suggest up to 150,000 deaths country-wide and more than 61,000 dead in Khartoum state alone.⁹



A group of women in an IDP camp, South Darfur

Photo: UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran

Foreign military assistance

SAF: Egypt has been a long-standing supporter of the SAF. It sees the SAF as the moderate actor in the Sudanese context and the best option to block the ambitions of UAE in an area Egypt considers its own “backyard.” At the start of the conflict the Egyptian Air Force provided tactical and intelligence support. It subsequently scaled down its support to sporadic military equipment and training of SAF military.¹⁰ In August 2024, in another volta-face, Egypt allegedly provided eight fighter jets to SAF,¹¹ and in January 2025 it announced that together with Somalia and Eritrea it would train SAF troops.¹² Iran is the other regional quartermaster for SAF.¹³ It seeks to consolidate its foothold around the strategic Red Sea, and since December 2023 has sent at least nine cargo planes with military equipment to Sudan.¹⁴ The other military supporters of SAF have been Eritrea,¹⁵ Turkey,¹⁶ China¹⁷ and Russia.¹⁸

RSF: The UAE has been providing assistance to the RSF on a broad scale, including military intelligence and equipment transferred via Chad.¹⁹ Its overall interests relate to a desire to strengthen its foothold in the strategically important Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, and to prevent Islamists from taking power in Sudan. The latter objective is part of the UAE's regional efforts against Islamist political groups that the UAE perceives as existential threats. Other actors that have been supporting the RSF are the Russian Wagner group,²⁰ the Libyan National Army,²¹ and mercenaries from Chad and Central African Republic.²²

It is difficult to see how the war would have been possible without external involvement from countries in the Middle East. The UAE gave the RSF an independent platform to launch a military campaign, while support from Iran and Egypt enabled the SAF to avoid defeat after the onslaught from the RSF. The war in Sudan is therefore partly a proxy war reflecting the Middle Eastern countries' struggle for power and influence in their own region and in Africa. Sudan is particularly important from a geopolitical point of view as it is strategically placed with a long coastline to the Red Sea and offers access to inter alia Ethiopia and Egypt. A mediated peace is thus unlikely without the Middle East regional dimension being addressed and without including the providers of military support – one way or another – in the mediation process.

Mediation dynamics

The African multi-lateral mediation initiatives have been marked by lack of coordination and limited results. It has rather been ad hoc initiatives emerging from the Middle Eastern context that have gained prominence. Several of them have been characterized by urgency and secrecy, where the immediate goals were a temporary halt in fighting and greater humanitarian access to conflict zones. All the peace talks have been unsuccessful, largely because the warring parties want to strengthen their military position before concluding any deal, and because their leaders seem reticent to participate in talks that may result in them losing of power. Because of the foreign support to the warring parties, these leaders consider continued fighting a viable option.

Both the AU and IGAD sought to play a leading role in mediation efforts and tried to coordinate the political processes between the civilian forces. Between April and June 2023, the AU attempted unsuccessfully to coordinate the different nascent mediation efforts.²³ In January 2024, IGAD tried to convene a face-to-face meeting between the SAF and RSF leaders – respectively Abdel Fattah al- Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (“Hemeti”) – in Kampala. Al-Burhan rejected the invitation at the last moment and a few days later SAF announced that Sudan had suspended its membership of IGAD.²⁴

MEDIATOR	FOCUS	PERIOD	PARTIES	OUTCOME
US, Saudi (later joined by Switzerland)	Ceasefire SAF-RSF; humanitarian access; respect international humanitarian law and human rights	May 2023 - Ongoing	RSF - SAF	Declaration of Commitment to Protect Civilians (parties didn't comply), May 2023; commitment to open humanitarian corridors, August 2024
AU	SAF-RSF conflict; coordination of mediation efforts; political process	April 2023-Ongoing	RSF – SAF – political parties – civil society – armed groups – regional actors	Joint guidelines for the political process
Egypt-UAE-Bahrain	Ceasefire SAF-RSF	December 2023- January 2024	RSF-SAF	No agreement
IGAD	SAF-RSF conflict; political process	June 2023 – January 2024	RSF-SAF	No agreement
Egypt	Ceasefire SAF-RSF; humanitarian crisis; political transition	December 2023-On-going	RSF-SAF-political parties-armed groups	No agreement
Turkey	SAF-UAE	December 2024-On-going	SAF-UAE	No agreement (yet)

Also in January 2024, the AU created the High-Level Panel to engage the conflict parties and organize an “Inter-Sudanese dialogue.”²⁵ The first round of talks was boycotted by a large portion of the Sudanese political and civilian forces, which alleged there was a lack of transparency, and a second round was held in August.²⁶ The AU effort also created a Peace and Security Council Ad-hoc Committee on Sudan but the RSF and the SAF refused to interact with it.²⁷

The parties’ resistance to IGAD and AU mediation was due in part to concerns about the organizations’ lack of impartiality. They perceived the member states of IGAD as biased, and the AU’s suspension of Sudan after the 2021 coup was not conducive to the organization also playing a mediating role. Furthermore, the two organizations initially pursued parallel tracks, and there were divisions within the Peace and Security Council of the AU. The limitations of the AU and IGAD mediation initiatives created a vacuum that Middle Eastern actors have sought to fill. Their involvement is also a result of the above-mentioned political and economic shift since 2011, with Sudan gravitating toward the Middle East and the Gulf, and the warring domestic parties gaining new patrons and strengthening ties with the existing ones.

In May 2023 the United States (US) and Saudi Arabia jointly launched the ‘Jeddah process,’ which consisted of negotiations between RSF and SAF on a ceasefire, humanitarian access and a commitment to respect international humanitarian law and human rights. The process was presented as a confidence-building track to support the AU-IGAD initiatives.²⁸ Nevertheless, it soon became separated from the AU-IGAD tracks. For a while it was the main mediation process, accompanied by stern rebukes from the AU and IGAD demanding to be included.²⁹ In March 2024 the AU’s mediation efforts became integrated with the Jeddah initiative. There were multiple negotiation rounds from May 2023 until May 2024, but despite the Declaration of Commitment to Protect Civilians signed by the two parties on May 11, 2023, the initiative failed to produce any lasting agreement.³⁰

Additionally, in January 2024 the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain organized a series of talks in Manama between senior SAF and RSF officials as a back channel of the Jeddah process. These talks were significant because it was the first time that high-level representatives from both sides attended the negotiations, and the convenors were their two main foreign backers. Despite apparent success in the first two meetings, where the parties agreed on different points concerning a cessation of hostilities and transition process,

the SAF refused to participate in the third round.³¹

In August 2024, the Jeddah and AU processes were succeeded by talks in Geneva organized by the US, with Switzerland and Saudi Arabia as co-hosts. These talks included the UN, AU, UAE and Egypt as observers. The RSF representatives attended in person, while SAF decided at the last moment to only participate virtually because the RSF had not withdrawn from certain areas and because the UAE participated in the talks. The Geneva process was important because it was supported by the UAE and Egypt and resulted in the parties committing to facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid.³²

On yet another parallel track, in May 2024, Egypt hosted a conference of various political parties and armed groups backing SAF. This resulted in a unified platform called the

Sudan Charter Forces (SCF), which advocated for a transition to civilian power that would include the military.³³ On July 2024, Cairo organized an inter-Sudanese political dialogue on the post-war transition, which gathered the SCF, the Coordination of Civil and Democratic Forces (Taqqadum) and other political and civilian groups.³⁴ The Egyptian process has focused on solutions that advance Cairo's strategic interest in Sudan; most importantly, to secure SAF a key role in a post-war transition to a centralized state. A consequence of the shift toward Middle Eastern mediation initiatives has been the pursuit of short-term transactional deals, the marginalization of the Sudanese civilian and political actors promoting democracy and the neglect of deeper political reform.

Finally, in December 2024, Turkey's President Erdoğan offered to mediate between SAF and the UAE.³⁵ The UAE "welcomed" the Turkish diplomatic efforts,³⁶ and on January 4, 2025, the Turkish deputy foreign minister held a meeting with al-Burhan in Port Sudan, in which SAF supported Turkey's offer to mediate.³⁷ At the time of writing (March 2025), it is too early to determine the significance of the Turkish initiative. However, the country is well-positioned to mediate because it maintains good relations with SAF, and since the 2019 popular revolt in Sudan, it has given asylum to prominent Sudanese Islamist politicians and clerics.³⁸

A general observation is that in peace talks and political negotiations before 2023, political reform and transition to constitutional civilian rule were among the main issues on the agenda. In the current war, only the AU and IGAD insisted on including these issues in their frameworks for talks. Egypt's initiatives have also included civilian parties, but in a less prominent role.³⁹

Another prominent feature of the efforts to find a peaceful solution has been the multitude of initiatives that overlap and have not been well-coordinated. Arguably, a justification for this potpourri of peace interventions is that everything possible must be tried to stop the bloodshed, but it has now become evident that the conflict is entrenched and that the parties, especially SAF, have opted to gain ground militarily rather than to compromise with RSF. There is concern that the longer the war continues, the more likely it is that the parties will fragment further, and the conflict will become more difficult to resolve.

The availability of multiple mediation platforms has opened up the possibility of "forum shopping," which has been to the detriment of some civilian actors and the African institutions. In July 2024 some Sudanese actors, such as Taqqadum, preferred the Egypt-led political process and boycotted the AU process because it included the former ruling party of al-Bashir.⁴⁰ The swarm of peace initiatives has also made it difficult to deal with the regional dimension of the conflict, partly because several of the mediating countries are also proximate conflict parties.

How mediation initiatives have addressed regional dimensions

There have been few mediation attempts to address the regional dimension of the war. The most relevant has been the above-mentioned Turkish initiative to mediate between SAF and the UAE in late 2024 and early 2025. Tentative reports indicate that the aim is to convince the UAE to end its support to the RSF in exchange for Sudan withdrawing its complaints against the UAE at the UN Security Council.⁴¹ Even if the initiative succeeds in addressing part of the regional dimension of the war, however, this would be a strictly transactional process that would not necessarily provide a durable solution to the conflict. For this to happen, the RSF must



Displaced residents return to Darfur camp after looting and violence **Photo:** UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran

be included in the talks and the broader political issues must be addressed.

The other mediation initiatives that included the regional backers of the two parties were the Manama process, where the UAE and Egypt acted as co-facilitators, and the Geneva Process, which included UAE and Egypt as observers. The inclusion of the regional actors seems to have been determined by political affinity rather than by a real will to address the regionalization of the conflict. It is telling, for example, that Iran (a deeply involved party) is excluded due to the antagonism between Tehran and the convenors of the mediation.

The effects of these different initiatives have been contradictory. In the Manama process, the fact that the UAE and Egypt were co-facilitators seemed to improve the legitimacy of the process as the two sides assisted the negotiations between high-ranking Sudanese officers. Nonetheless, in Geneva, including the same two countries as observers had the opposite effect; the SAF refused to participate, partly because of the presence of the UAE.

Conclusion

The central question regarding mediation and conflict regionalization is not whether the regional powers should be involved in the mediation, but rather what kind of format would be conducive for talks that cover their interests in the conflict. For the time being, there are no multilateral organizations nor any global power that can dictate the conditions for their participation or exclusion. In the existing political climate and looking at precedence set in other contexts (e.g., the IGAD-led mediation processes for previous conflicts in South Sudan), it is likely that the only realistic option is to include these parties as part of constellations of facilitators of mediation rather than as parties to the conflict. Specifically, a summit-like structure similar to the Geneva talks could work as a constructive platform to open fluid back-channel communications with regional actors and keep them on board the mediation process. Part of the reason for this is that with the high level of involvement of external actors at the global level and the critical geopolitical stakes, it is difficult to find any third-party mechanism/forum that the regional parties would recognize as “neutral.”

Urgency is an argument for a pragmatic approach to both the mediation framework and the role of the regional powers in supporting the Sudanese belligerents. The longer the war lasts, the more likely it is that the country will be split in two or fragment completely. The quickest way to end the war is if the regional powers supporting the domestic conflict parties decide to jointly put pressure on them, although there are other existing or potential sponsors such as Russia and China that would also need to be on board.

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