The Failure of Mediation and Peacemaking Efforts in the Sudan Crisis

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Abstract

This paper examines internal and external mediation efforts aimed at addressing the devastating war in Sudan. The nature and scale of the war in Sudan make mediation extremely difficult but also increasingly urgent. The paper engages with existing mediation frameworks and tackles complexities of peacemaking efforts in Sudan. It adopts a qualitative approach, relies on an actor-focused analysis, desk review of mediation literature and initiatives, and stakeholder interviews with academics, civil society activists, politicians and experts. The war in Sudan is proving difficult for mediators and peacemakers due to the entanglements of sociopolitical, geographical, economic, regional and international factors. This is not simply a war between two armies, but a political and social conflict, with regional and international dimensions. Several internal and external mediations emerged to address the war. Internal initiatives failed due to the lack of a clear vision, deep societal divisions, weak mediation capacity, complexity of the crisis, short-term interests and the lack of genuine commitment to inclusive peace. External actors simplify the crisis by not fully acknowledging the diversity of political forces at play. This overlooked the multifaceted nature of the situation. As a result, the complexity of the conflict is ignored, leading to stalemates in the mediation initiatives.

Keywords: Sudan, mediation, conflict, peace

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1. Introduction

Sudan's post-independence history is one of protracted conflicts and durable disorders (Sørbø and Ahmed, 2013; Assal, 2022). In 1955, one year before independence, the first civil war erupted, caused by the southern Sudanese's grievance at being deprived the promised right of self-rule. The first civil war, ended by the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972, was facilitated by Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. It gave southern Sudan a semi-autonomous self-rule. Southern Sudan experienced 10 years of peace and stability but in 1983, war broke out again. The abrogation of the agreement by President Numeiri led to the second civil war (Khalil, 2021) that raged from 1983 to 2005.

While the first civil war was in a way limited to southern Sudan, the second war was internally complex and included various parts of the country. This time, mediation to end the war involved several players: the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU) and the Troika (the United States [US], Britain and Norway). Mediation resulted in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. The agreement ended the war, but peace continued to be absent. The agreement was intended to make unity attractive, establish good governance and political stability and redress social, economic and political grievances. But it ended up making secession (formalised in 2011) attractive and intensified political instability in Sudan and South Sudan (Komey, 2010).

While the implementation of the CPA was underway, war erupted in Darfur and Eastern Sudan. Multiple peace agreements were negotiated and signed to stop the war in Darfur (Tubiana, 2013) and Eastern Sudan (Assal, 2013). The Abuja Agreement (2005), the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (2006) and the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur (2011) were all facilitated by external mediators. These mediation efforts, while successful in signing peace deals, did not resolve the conflict. Except for the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972, the different peace agreements were not inclusive. At the time of the Addis Ababa negotiations, there was only one rebel group fighting the Sudanese government. The negotiations were between the antagonists only: the Sudanese government and the Anya-Nya rebels. Following the collapse of Omar al-Bashir's regime, the transitional government (2019–2021), emulating the perspectives of its predecessor and with the mediation efforts of IGAD, South Sudan and the Troika, concluded the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) in October 2020 (Assal, 2022). Like previous agreements, the JPA was not

inclusive. Lack of commitment to implementing it contributed to the collapse of the transition and the eruption of the April 2023 war.

The April 2023 war inflicted egregious human suffering and involved the destruction of infrastructure, looting, pillaging and ransacking of homes, public and private properties. Millions of Sudanese became displaced within and outside the country, fleeing under difficult conditions. Social polarisation threatens to break the fabric of society, not least in areas like Darfur, which are yet to recover from 20 years of devastating wars (Assal, 2023). The continuation of war will further divide communities, increase tribal-based militias under the condition of community mobilisation and militarisation of civilians by warring parties. This paper highlights and analyzes internal and external mediation and peacemaking efforts that emerged in the aftermath of the October 2021 military coup and the April 2023 war, considering Sudan's long history with mediation initiatives.

2. Objectives and methodology

This paper seeks to (a) analyse existing mediation and peacemaking initiatives within the framework of conflict dynamics and positions of the conflicting parties, and (b) analyse factors behind the failure of mediation and peacemaking initiatives. Methodologically, the paper falls within the domain of qualitative studies and is based on a wide range of data sources gathered from a desk review of mediation initiatives, stakeholder interviews and events analysis. The authors undertook extensive and critical reviews of contemporary information about the dynamics of the conflicts and peacemaking efforts that followed the coup of October 2021 and its repercussions on the transitional government. The authors conducted 12 qualitative interviews with key informants, knowledgeable and experienced people within and outside Sudan to grasp their views about mediation and peacemaking initiatives and their vision for bringing peace and stability in Sudan. The interviewees represent political parties, academia, civil society, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and regional organisations. The authors obtained verbal consent of the participants in this study. The key informants who participated in this study have 10 years or more of experience in their field of specialisation. Their participation is based on their knowledge and expertise. Due to the sensitivity of issues under consideration, we anonymised our informants by allocating them pseudonyms.

3. Theoretical framework of mediation and peacemaking

Mediation is defined as assistance provided for two or more conflicting parties who usually have no authority to impose an outcome (Assal, 2022). Mediation in the context of war can be defined procedurally as a voluntary process led by the mediator/s to intervene positively to help the conflicting parties reach a solution. Kressel (2006a:726) defines mediation as:

> … a process in which disputants attempt to resolve their differences with the assistance of an acceptable third party. The mediator's objectives are typically to help the parties search for a mutually acceptable solution to their conflict and to counter tendencies toward competitive win-lose strategies and objectives. Mediators are most commonly single individuals, but they also can be twosomes, threesomes, or even larger groups.

The work of Morton Deutsch (1973) and Deutsch et al. (2006) represent key contributions to the field of mediation studies. Deutsch et al. (2006:1–20) outlines processes of conflict, the interplay between theorists and practitioners when it comes to mediation and conflict resolution and poses questions about conditions that give rise to a constructive or destructive process of conflict resolution. He claims that the concern is with the cognitive and normative factors that lead people to conceive a possible agreement and to perceive it as a salient possibility for reaching a stable agreement – one that each of the conflicting parties sees as 'just' under the circumstances.

Kressel (2006a:730–732) summarises conditions that undermine effective mediation to include: high levels of conflict, low motivation to reach an agreement, low commitment to mediation, shortage of resources, disputes involving fundamental principles, and parties of unequal power. These conditions make mediation stressful and may lead to the burnout of mediators. However, mediation may still succeed in situations where there are one or more of these conditions. This depends on the skill of mediators who might succeed in modifying some or all these conditions into favourable directions.

William Zartman developed 'ripeness theory' about conflict resolution. He published several studies on this theory (see, for example, 1986, 1989, 1995, 2000). In his opinion, two factors are centrally important for finding a solution by negotiation or mediation: the substance of proposals and timing of efforts. Zartman (2000: 225–226) argues that ripeness is a necessary condition for the

initiation of negotiations, bilateral or mediated. It must be seized by the parties or by the mediator. The mediator must specify the meaning and evidence of ripeness so that the conflicting parties can fruitfully start mediation sessions. Zartman's theory is predictive in the sense that it identifies some elements necessary for the productive initiation of mediation.

An effective mediation process is customised to the conflict's specific causes, dynamics and the parties' interests while considering the broader societal and international context. Key to success are inclusivity, transparency and communication with all relevant actors. International support through coordination bodies can provide political and resource backing but must be balanced with national ownership of the peace process. Aligning the process with international law and norms strengthens legitimacy and support, though balancing conflicting parties' demands with legal frameworks can be challenging (UN, 2012). The main challenge in resolving civil wars lies in getting conflicting parties to cooperate after agreeing to settle their differences, as the transition from war to peace creates vulnerability for both sides. According to Walter (1997:336), "organizational inertia, tunnel vision, wishful thinking, and miscommunication all work against early reconciliation and make cooperation difficult."

When factions sign a peace agreement, they risk becoming defenceless, as they lose their military power and enforcement capacity, making them distrustful of the other party's commitment to the agreement. This creates two key issues (Walter, 1997): first, *fear of vulnerability*. Both sides fear that complying with the peace agreement will leave them defenceless and exposed to potential attacks, making them hesitant to sign the treaty despite wanting peace. The fear that the other side may exploit the situation undermines trust. Second, *the incentive to keep fighting*. Both sides face a dilemma: if they comply with the agreement, they risk losing their ability to defend themselves, but if they do not, they prolong the violence and suffering. This leads to a preference for continuing the fight, as cooperation in peace is seen as more dangerous than ongoing conflict.

Although most authors use different explanatory variables, their theories can be broken down into two basic perspectives (Walter, 1997:340–344). The two aspects of fear of vulnerability and the incentive to keep fighting can further be explained by the following two mediation perspectives. First, *the rationalist perspective*, which contends that civil war factions are driven by the same cost-benefit

calculations as interstate actors but face unique challenges that make negotiation difficult. Rationalists claim that groups will only settle if they believe they cannot do better by either continuing to fight or bargaining. The reasons for fewer negotiated settlements in civil wars include: (a) Greater stakes: Winning a civil war offers significant rewards, such as full control of the state and the elimination of a rival. This makes parties to the conflict less willing to compromise and more likely to fight to the end. (b) Indivisible stakes: Domestic conflicts often involve stakes (such as state control or identity) that are difficult or impossible to divide. This makes a shared settlement harder to achieve, since there can only be one legitimate government or military force. (c) Complex bargaining conditions: Factors such as extremist demands, ambitious leaders, poor communication, fear and external interventions limit the range of acceptable solutions. Negotiation is complicated by these issues, requiring a skilled mediator to facilitate a deal (Kressel, 2006a, 2006b).

Second, *the ideational perspective*: this perspective views civil wars as deeply emotional and value-driven conflicts, making compromise particularly difficult. Civil wars are regarded as struggles over identity, cultural recognition and participation. Accordingly, there are a couple of issues: (a) Non-negotiable issues: Civil wars are fought over deeply entrenched issues of ethnic, cultural or political identity. These issues are often considered non-negotiable, making it harder for parties to find common ground. (b) Compromise is more difficult: When a conflict centres around existential or identity-related stakes, such as ethnic or religious recognition, finding a mutually acceptable solution is much more challenging. These emotional and value-laden issues resist rational negotiation seen in interstate wars (Walter, 1997:342).

Both perspectives are relevant and highlight the unique challenges of resolving the unfolding war in Sudan. The rationalist one focuses on strategic, cost-based barriers to settlement, and the ideational perspective emphasises the emotional and identity-driven nature of the conflict. From a rational perspective, the warring parties seem determined to continue fighting, each hoping to defeat the other. The hardline position of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) may be explained by the backing it receives from Islamists who are accused of amplifying the differences between the SAF and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) (Assal, 2023). The RSF appears to favour the ideational perspective through its adoption of a hardline position by demanding the removal of SAF leadership, fighting the remnants of al-Bashir's ousted regime and ending the historical control of the so-called 1956

State. It is worth noting that this terminology appeared after the April 2023 war. It is used by the RSF and its allies to refer to the postcolonial state in Sudan.

4. Sudanese context: Conflicts and mediation for peacemaking

Conflicts in Sudan have emanated from different interrelated sociocultural, political, economic and natural factors. Politically, uneven patterns of development and poor government policies have increased regional disparities and resulted in the eruption of regional conflicts and civil wars. Since 1955, the civil war in Sudan has continued to devastate large areas, causing the death and uprooting of millions of people (Hassan and Gray, 2002). For a long time, Sudan has experienced diverse types of conflicts between the central government and armed movements in South Sudan, Blue Nile, South Kordofan, Darfur and Eastern Sudan. As indicated in the introduction, several peace agreements that included the CPA of May 2005, the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement of October 2006, the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) of May 2006 and the JPA of October 2021, did not end Sudan's conflicts and civil unrest in various parts of the country (De Waal, 2022).

The CPA, signed in 2005, was a result of a long and complicated mediation process that started before the ascendance of Islamists to power. In this context, the use of the term 'Islamists' refers to key players in Sudan's politics, and their role in the current war cannot be glossed over. This grouping was influential in the 1989 military coup in Sudan (for more on the role of Islamists in Sudanese politics and the current war, see Gallab, 2008; Ali, 2010; Nur, 2023; Assal, 2025 [forthcoming]). Between 1989 and 1997, al-Bashir's regime attempted to bring peace through war (Assal, 2022). Before 1997, it was not possible for mediators to facilitate peace negotiations, as the government rejected the Declaration of Principles proposed by IGAD in 1992. The government preferred a locally crafted solution over an internationally mediated intervention and had been pursuing a strategy of 'peace from within', which produced the Khartoum Peace Agreement in April 1997 (Jok, 2017). For a prolonged period without progress in peace talks between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), four factors came together from 1997 onwards to encourage the parties to return to the negotiation table. First, it became clear that neither side would gain a decisive victory, so the door to the negotiation process became the priority. Second, there was a substantial change of personnel in Khartoum and new negotiators were introduced, who took steps to initiate communication and negotiation (Simons and Dixon, 2006:20). Third, there was mounting international

pressure from the African States and IGAD. Fourth, there was increased pressure from the US Congress (Jok, 2017). Parallel to the CPA negotiations, there were mediation efforts to resolve the conflict in Darfur, which erupted in 2003. International involvement in the conflict began with Chadian President Idriss Deby, who mediated a 45-day ceasefire in September 2003 between the Government of Sudan and the SLM/A. However, the ceasefire quickly broke down, and mediation efforts faltered.

In 2004, with the support of the AU, Chad mediated a ceasefire agreement to facilitate humanitarian access in Darfur. The Sudanese government opposed the participation of the US, European Union (EU) and United Nations (UN) in the mediation process but accepted the AU as the lead mediator, with international observers only allowed for humanitarian issues (Hottinger, 2006:47). The ceasefire modalities were formalised in May 2004, and further protocols addressing security and the humanitarian situation were signed in Abuja, Nigeria, in November 2004. Despite setbacks, pressure from the international community resulted in the signing of the DPA in May 2006, but it was signed by only one faction of the SLM/A, led by Minni Minnawi. The DPA followed a similar structure to the CPA, with a Declaration of Principles, followed by detailed protocols on wealth-sharing, power-sharing and security issues. However, the DPA did not provide details on implementation, as the CPA and the AU's mediation approach mirrored that of the IGAD mediators, which focused on power- and wealth-sharing in the CPA process without considering the specific context and dynamics of the Darfur conflict or lessons learned from the CPA process. While the CPA addressed a 23-year conflict in South Sudan, the Darfur conflict had been violent for three years by the time the DPA was signed, presenting different challenges and requiring a tailored and appropriate approach (Simons and Dixon, 2006).

Following the DPA, another agreement, the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA) was signed in October 2006. Asmara facilitated talks between the Eastern Front and the Sudan government (Assal, 2013). Eastern Sudan is another case of marginalisation where successive central governments in Khartoum denied the Beja people effective political participation and inclusion, leading the Beja people to organise into armed opposition. Through the Beja Congress, the Beja people continued their protests and resistance against successive central governments in Khartoum and turned into an armed movement in 1994, leading to low-intensity conflict in 1997. In 2004, the Beja Congress was merged with Rashaida's

'Free Lions Movement', and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) soon joined. The amalgamation of these groups resulted in the creation of 'The Eastern Front' (Young, 2007). Covering security issues, power-sharing and establishing the Eastern States Coordination Council, ESPA adopted the power-sharing model, which makes it like other peace agreements in Sudan. Representatives of the Eastern Front were nominated to serve at various levels of national, state and local government levels. The last mediated peace agreement was the JPA, signed in October 2020. It is worth noting that Sudan is not unique when it comes to the failure of mediaton efforts. Other contexts in the continent provide examples where multilateral organisations like IGAD, the AU and the UN did not succeed in their efforts. Ethiopia (Kondowe, 2024), South Sudan (Ifediora, 2021), Libya, Syria and Yemen (Transfeld et al., 2018) represent cases where mediation efforts stalled.

5. Mediation and peacemaking: the April 2023 war

There are competing narratives about the war, and there is no agreement about who should be blamed for it – SAF and those behind it or the RSF and its supporters. Competing narratives led to a polarised civil society and narrowed pathways for peaceful settlement (Assal, 2023; IDEA, 2023; El Mahdi et al., 2024:21–34). In this regard, Sudanese social media and other debate forums (e.g., Gulf TV channels) are rife with heated debates about the characterization of the war and who fired the first bullet. Islamists loyal to former President Omar al-Bashir were blamed for having fired the first bullet and drawing the SAF and the RSF into the war (for more on this, see Copnall, 2023).

Our key informants offered interesting perspectives about the war. For some, this war cannot be simply reduced to one between two generals:

> The war started in Sudan since independence in 1956, due to lack of consensus over governance issues. Power-sharing and lack of diversity recognition were central to this (Hamad, interview, 23 October 2024).

The war has also been seen as more than confrontation between the SAF and the RSF:

> It is a sociopolitical and economic conflict. The army is [a] mere military wing of a socioeconomic class that has been trying to preserve its privileges since the colonial era (Zuhair, interview, 24 October 2024).

The narrative that the RSF waged the war to preserve its interests has some resonance among our key informants:

> The conflict involves the national army fighting against a paramilitary group, the RSF, which was once aligned with the transitional government but has since turned against it. The RSF is motivated by economic interests, seeking control over resources like gold, as well as political power to protect its economic empire (Omer, interview, 30 October 2024).
>
> The power struggle is driven by the deposed regime's attempts to retain control over the state's resources and resist reforms to Sudan's military and political systems. The RSF has garnered significant support from marginalised regions, particularly in Western Sudan and the Blue Nile, and has positioned itself as a social movement (Hamid, interview, 25 October 2024).

There is also the view that the war is a military conflict between two warring parties, as a rejection of the Political Framework Agreement that was meant to shift Sudan towards civilian rule. This rejection is seen as a move to maintain the status quo and restore the power of the Islamists.

Others consider the April war from a wider historical perspective:

> The war should be seen as a deep sense of social unfairness, which has led to complex political, military and economic battles for power and resources. It reflects broader struggles within Sudan, where elites from specific regions and social classes use ideology, ethnicity and kinship to maintain control over power and wealth. The use of military force, including militias, has been central to these struggles, which are framed along ethnic and ideological lines. The war is a contest over Sudan's resources, where national interests have been sidelined in favour of self-interest and regional dominance (Abdelkarim, interview, 10 November 2024).

While this is an internal Sudanese war, it has taken on considerable regional and international dimensions, complicating conditions and hindering efforts for a peaceful resolution. The involvement of various countries and organisations, driven by their own interests, has made the war more protracted and multifaceted. While it is fought in Sudan between Sudanese parties, it is influenced by regional dynamics. Regional actors, including neighbouring countries, have exacerbated and prolonged the conflict by supporting different sides for their own strategic interests (ICG, 2023). This makes the war part of a larger contest over regional

power and control, not just a localised civil war. Neighbouring countries and regional actors are interested in maintaining a military regime in Sudan to secure access to Sudan's resources:

> The war is fundamentally an internal struggle, driven by national issues like power-sharing and control over resources. However, external actors have provided military, financial and diplomatic support to various factions, further fuelling the war and complicating its resolution (Naba, interview, 2 November 2024).

6. Internal peace making: civilian initiatives

Internal actors engaged in initiatives aimed at ending the war in Sudan. Abdul-Jalil and Kameir (2023) analysed 15 Sudanese civilian initiatives that offered to mediate. However, these initiatives, some of which predated the war and appeared in response to the October 2021 military coup, overlook key issues, particularly the peace and security situation outside Khartoum and fail to outline how a ceasefire between SAF and the RSF could be achieved. These initiatives did not address how political parties in Sudan should be engaged in efforts to end the war and rebuild state institutions. The different initiatives target academics, women, youth and religious leaders, avoiding political parties lest they are accused of supporting a certain political orientation. Political parties are the vehicles for democratic transition, but their involvement in the transitional period that followed the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 was a controversial issue. There were calls for having technocrats to run the country during the transition, and that political parties should prepare for elections at the end of the transitional period. The way forward for Sudan's transition involves creating a civilian political alliance through consensus, agreeing on a constitutional document, forming government and state institutions and concluding the transition with general elections.

The initiatives analysed by Abdul-Jalil and Kameir (2023) have common positions on most critical issues on the agenda of the process of ending the war, namely: stopping the war, civil and democratic governance, a united civil front; transitional justice, comprehensive peace; and a constitutional conference. However, they face problems that affect their potential impact on the political process. These problems include the initiatives' degree of public outreach, internal management mechanisms, external network, experience and technical capacity. Out of the 15 initiatives, only five were active, engaging in regular activities such as holding

meetings, developing written proposals and communicating with various stakeholders – efforts that could potentially influence the political and diplomatic process (Abdul-Jalil and Kameir, 2023). These include: Sudanese Civil Actors and Activists Speak with One Voice, Concerned Sudanese, the National Mechanism to Support Civil Democratic Transition, the Sudan Peace, Development, and Democracy Platform, and the Sudan All-Inclusive National Convention.

Interview results showed that internal initiatives stalled due to several factors:

a. *Elite domination and lack of inclusivity*: Civil society in Sudan is controlled by elites, limiting its ability to represent the broader population or address public needs. Many initiatives are politically driven, reflecting specific interests and hindering the potential for civil society to unite the country for peace (Hamad, interview, 23 October 2024; Majak, interview, 26 October 2024). Many informants agreed on certain aspects related to the failure of internal mediation initiatives.

b. *Lack of capacity*: "Civil society organisations are weak, fragmented, and lack technical expertise and resources necessary to play [a] significant role in peacebuilding. Their inability to address complexities of Sudan's conflict limits their impact on political processes" (Sami, interview, 23 October 2024; and Ahmed, interview, 26 October 2024).

c. *Co-optation by political parties and external influences:* "Many civil society organizations have been co-opted by political parties or external donors, which politicizes their efforts and weaken their independence. This has diverted attention from local needs and made civil society more susceptible to manipulation" (Abdelkarim, interview, 18 November 2024).

d. *Fragmentation and divisions*: "Sudan's ongoing conflicts and domestic divisions have fragmented civil society, making it difficult to organise and advocate effectively. Lack of unity within civil society has hampered its capacity to function as a cohesive force for peace" (Ahmed, interview, 26 October 2024).

Additional factors contributing to the failure of internal mediations include the inability to touch on core political issues that have for long contributed to protracted conflicts. The target of civilians is the reform of the state and the

prevalence of justice and equality, but the challenge is that everyone is party to the conflict:

> The Sudanese are all entangled in this conflict, and no one is fit to offer mediation due to competing political, geographical, and ethnic interests (Hamid, interview, 23 October 2024).

Internal mediation is brittle, and political parties, civil society and tribal leaders are divided. This occurs despite Sudan being rich in Indigenous knowledge on conflict resolution, including what is known in Sudan as *Judiyya* – an Indigenous framework for resolving conflicts (Bronkhorst, 2012).

For these initiatives to succeed, they ought to benefit from Indigenous knowledge and local wisdom on conflict resolution mechanisms. This way, they may succeed in achieving inclusive dialogue with a national agenda, such as a unified professional army and zero tolerance for militia, whether fighting with the army or against it:

> Removing weapons from politics requires involving all. We cannot exclude, for instance, the Islamists or Darfuri movements from these talks and expect them to demobilise/dismantle their militias. But having them around the negotiation table does not mean they should have a share of the power. The power-sharing paradigm of elitist peace should be avoided if we are to have successful internal initiatives (Abdelkarim, interview, 18 November 2024).

6.1 The initiative of the Coordination of Civil and Democratic Forces (Taqaddum)

The Coordination of Civil and Democratic Forces, better known as *Taqaddum*, was established in October 2023 as a civilian political alliance in Sudan. Led by former Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok, Taqaddum includes political parties, unions, professional bodies and resistance committees. In January 2024, Taqaddum met with RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo in Addis Ababa, marking the first meeting between Sudanese civilians and the RSF after the start of the war. Taqaddum and the RSF signed a joint declaration to work towards ending the war and preventing civilian abuses, but the RSF has ignored the declaration despite initial affirmations (see Assal, 2024 for more on the role of civilians in general and Taqaddum in particular).

Taqaddum, despite its civilian base, has struggled to unify Sudan's civic anti-war movement due to internal divisions, particularly over whether conflict actors should shape the country's future. These divisions have led to fragmented engagement with competing mediation efforts, including the US–Saudi initiative, Egypt's regional approach and South Sudan's involvement, which collectively undermine IGAD's role.

The interviews indicate that this fragmentation has significantly weakened Taqaddum's ability to build nationwide support, as seen below.

a. *Narrow focus and rejection by SAF:* Initiatives like Taqaddum have often focused on specific solutions without taking into consideration broader political dynamics, particularly the military's role and desire to retain power. The military has been central to Sudanese politics and ruled the country for protracted periods – 1958–1964, 1969–1985, 1989–2019, and 2021 to the present – entrenching its interest in political power in Sudan. The failure by Taqaddum to recognise the military's entrenched interests explains SAF's rejection of such initiatives. SAF's rejection of the declaration signed between Taqaddum and the RSF annulled the declaration and SAF succeeded in creating hostile public opinion about it. Instead of considering it as an attempt to stop the war, the declaration is seen as an attempt by Taqaddum to share power with the RSF: "Taqaddum's first initiative with the RSF leader was not strategic and stereotyped the coalition. Taqaddum itself has challenges in its organization and strategies" (Samreen, interview, 20 October 2024).

b. *Weak and divisive leadership*: Taqaddum's leadership, particularly in its declaration with the RSF, was criticised for poor strategic planning and lack of depth. Taqaddum also struggled with internal divisions and its inability to manage diverse political views, undermining its effectiveness. This, among other factors, limited its legitimacy and ability to mobilise civilians in support of its mediation and peacemaking efforts: "Taqaddum has lost a great deal of its legitimacy and depends more on external leverage than broader Sudanese support" (Abdelkarim, interview, 18 November 2024). Notwithstanding this, pro-war voices are loud in Sudan. The authorities in Sudan suppress calls for ending the war and silence peace activists through harassment and threats of jail. Accusations of supporting the RSF can lead to death sentences or life imprisonment. The attorney general in Sudan issued arrest warrants against

Taqaddum leaders and those who oppose the war, including former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok (see Sudan Tribune, 2024).

c. *Exclusionary orientations:* Taqaddum has been criticised for failing to represent Sudan's diverse regions and groups, which hindered its ability to form a unified political coalition. The exclusionary orientation of Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), the main civilian group of Taqaddum, and its inability to effectively govern during Sudan's transitional period further damaged its credibility. Civilian disarray represents one of the impediments to ending the conflict in Sudan. In fact, this disarray contributes to explaining the war itself. The failure of Taqaddum, the main civilian coalition, is a continuation of civilian discord during the 2019–2021 transition. Yet the warring parties also contribute to sabotaging efforts not only of Taqaddum, but of other external initiatives, as discussed below. In February 2025, Taqaddum experienced a split, something that weakened it and dwindled its capacity to work for peace in Sudan.

7. External mediation initiatives

Like previous wars, the current one received multiple external mediation initiatives. Some of these are presidential (e.g., mediation initiative by the president of South Sudan, Salva Kiir), country initiatives, such as the Egyptian mediation (which later developed into the Neighboring Countries Initiative), or bilateral, such as the Saudi Arabian and the US mediation. A pattern of multi-track mediation also emerged, bringing together various initiatives, such as the initiatives of the AU and IGAD within the body of facilitators in the Jeddah Platform. Salva Kiir's effort should be viewed in the context of Sudan and South Sudan's relationship in light of their shared historical bonds and challenges.

South Sudan facilitated the Juba Peace Agreement in 2020. In 2018, Sudan brokered the peace agreement for South Sudan (Assal, 2022; ICG, 2023). The two countries are mutually affected by conflicts in their respective territories. The war in Sudan caused hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees to flee to South Sudan, in addition to similar numbers of South Sudanese refugees who were in Sudan before the war (Elhassan 2016; Pendle et al., 2023). The economic interests of the two countries (South Sudan is dependent on oil and its pipeline passes through Sudan, while Sudan benefits from pipeline fees) represent other factors that add clout to the potential role of South Sudan. Given their past experiences in

mediating peace agreements for each other, it would have made sense if South Sudan's presidential mediation efforts were successful. The next section elaborates the mediation efforts of the AU to terminate the war in Sudan.

7.1 African Union efforts to end the war in Sudan

The AU adopted a multifaceted strategy to address the ongoing conflict in Sudan, primarily through the Expanded Mechanism for the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan and the AU High-Level Panel on Sudan. The Expanded Mechanism, established in 2023, convenes regional and international actors, including the UN, IGAD and neighbouring states, to coordinate mediation efforts and prevent fragmented peace initiatives. It supports the AU Roadmap for Sudan, which emphasises inclusive dialogue, cessation of hostilities and humanitarian access, while also engaging with the US–Saudi-led Jeddah Process (AU, 2023). The AU High-Level Panel on Sudan, chaired by Dr Mohamed Ibn Chambas, focuses on diplomatic engagement with Sudanese stakeholders. It promotes inclusive political dialogue and calls for the involvement of civil society, political parties and displaced populations in shaping Sudan's future governance. The Panel has also raised alarm over the humanitarian crisis, describing it as one of the worst globally and has criticised the reliance on military solutions by the warring parties (AU, 2025).

The 4th Meeting of the Expanded Mechanism on the Crisis in Sudan, held in Djibouti on 4 December 2023, concluded that the AU and IGAD should promptly execute their plan to organise an all-inclusive political dialogue among all Sudanese parties. This dialogue would deal with both the establishment of a permanent ceasefire and the formation of a civilian transitional government (AU, 2023; El Mahdi et al., 2024). Despite these efforts, the AU faces structural limitations. Sudan's suspension from AU organs following the 2021 coup has restricted formal engagement, forcing the AU to rely on indirect diplomacy through neighbouring states. Additionally, overlapping mediation frameworks – AU, IGAD and the Jeddah Platform – have created confusion and weakened the coherence of peace efforts.

7.2 Jeddah Platform

The Jeddah Platform started in May 2023, less than one month after the start of the war. Saudi Arabia and the US are the two key mediators who attempted to secure a ceasefire in Sudan. The US–Saudi mediation focused on humanitarian talks only.

The convenors' aim was to pause fighting to allow the delivery of humanitarian aid and restore services to conflict-affected areas (Assal, 2023). In October 2023, a joint statement was issued by the facilitators, stating that issues of a political nature would not be included, and their focus would be on the delivery of humanitarian aid, achieving a ceasefire and confidence-building measures.

The Jeddah negotiations stalled due to the failure of the two parties to implement the two declarations signed on 11 and 20 May 2023. Nonetheless, the Jeddah Platform is the only diplomatic effort to have succeeded in bringing the warring parties to the negotiation table, if only indirectly. The talks excluded civilians and as of October 2023, the mediators suspended the talks due to the failure of SAF and the RSF to honour ceasefire commitments and allow humanitarian access. In August 2024, the mediators extended an invitation to SAF and the RSF to meet in Geneva. SAF boycotted the meeting, and the meeting ended up focusing on humanitarian access. One report (ICG, 2023:7) argues that both sides seek to use the humanitarian talks for tactical advantage. Divisions in the senior ranks of SAF are another obstacle to clinching a deal. The mediators have struggled to extract an agreement from al-Burhan, given that senior army officers hold divergent views. Some are more intent than others on not stopping the fighting until the RSF has been destroyed.

Below is an analysis of the factors responsible for the lack of progress on the Jeddah Platform.

- *Lack of implementation mechanisms*: The platform lacked a clear mechanism for enforcing agreements, and its structure is unbalanced.
- *Misunderstanding of the conflict's nature:* Mediators failed to grasp the complex sociopolitical dimensions of the conflict. Their focus was on the reform agenda of the December Revolution (state reform, security-sector reform, and the establishment of a civilian government), which did not align with the immediate realities or priorities of the parties involved. SAF is bent on destroying the RSF or forcing it out of the areas it occupied, and consolidating its grip on the state, while the RSF is determined to dismantle the power centres of the Islamists.
- *Focus on military matters and ignoring political and social issues*: The platform treated the conflict as a purely military matter, bringing only the warring parties to the table. This approach failed to address the deeper

political and social issues driving the war. By focusing only on military factions, it ignored broader structural problems fuelling the conflict, making any potential outcome unsustainable (Fayez, interview, 14 October 2024; and Abdelkarim, interview, 18 November 2024). The Jeddah Platform also did not include key external actors like the AU and IGAD.

Zartman's (2000) 'ripeness theory' helps illustrate why the Jeddah Platform did not succeed. This can be explained by external interventions as well as the support that SAF and the RSF are receiving to boost their war efforts. Gulf countries (United Arab Emirates [UAE], Saudi Arabia and Qatar), Egypt and Turkey have divergent economic and geopolitical interests in Sudan, leading to their support of the warring parties (Van den Berg and Meester, 2019; Abbas, 2025; Soliman and Baldo, 2025). The support that SAF and RSF receive enboldens them to continue fighting with the objective of winning militarily.

7.3 IGAD initiative

IGAD launched its initiative at the 14th regular session meeting in Djibouti on 12 June 2023. The initiative adopted a road map anchored on practical steps, including the formation of a committee from Kenya, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Djibouti – known as the quartet – chaired by William Ruto, the Kenyan president. The role of the committee was to facilitate a meeting between the SAF commander and the RSF commander, as well as to arrange a safe corridor for humanitarian aid and start a comprehensive political process within three weeks. SAF opposed this step and rejected the leadership of the Kenyan president. IGAD, in its 42nd summit in Uganda, invited SAF and the RSF, hoping that the two leaders could meet. While SAF rejected the invitation, the RSF leader attended. Subsequently, Sudan suspended its membership of IGAD. This step further thwarted the role of IGAD and rendered its initiative ineffective.

Analysis of the responses from key informants reveals the following factors responsible for the failure of the IGAD initiative:

- *Lack of implementation mechanism:* IGAD mediators, like those of the Jeddah Platform, had no implementation mechanism and lacked the necessary commitment to ending the war, suggesting insufficient political will and capacity to resolve the conflict. IGAD's summit decisions and communiques were loose and did not carry any implementation force or impetus (Hamad, interview, 23 October 2024). An informant argues: "IGAD

failed because it wants to keep RSF as part of the political equation, something which SAF will not accept" (Samia, interview, 20 November 2024).

- *Lack of interest from key parties:* Key actors in the conflict – SAF and the RSF – and their backers, have little interest in achieving peace, undermining mediation efforts (Zuahir, interview, 24 October 2024; and Hamid, interview, 25 October 2024). There is also an active pro-war front in Sudan that is undermining internal and external efforts to end the war. This front includes supporters of the former regime, signatories of the Juba Peace Agreement and other actors with vested interests in the continuation of the war.
- *Slowness of IGAD*: IGAD, an important multilateral organisation, is slow and depends on other powerful international actors. Sudan voluntarily suspended its membership of IGAD in January 2024. This weakened the organisation and slowed the pace of its engagement with the crisis in Sudan. Technical and financial problems are additional factors that hindered IGAD. Dearth of resources, economic dependency on donors, conflicts between member state leaders, absence of a hegemonic anchor state and external interventions work together to render IGAD less effective. IGAD's 2024 income report showed its heavy reliance on external donors: of its total income of US$ 64.6 million, only US$ 13 million was contributed by member states, while US$ 51 million came from international partners (see Oluoch, 2025). Moreover, fragmented regional positions also undermine IGAD's efforts.
- *Conflicting interests of some African countries*: There is a conflict of interest between African countries and the Sudanese parties involved. Managing this relationship constitutes a challenge. Sudan's self-suspension from IGAD and the AU's suspension of Sudan's participation in AU activities due to the military coup of October 2021 added further complications. Relationships between heads of states in IGAD are not healthy (Dubale 2024:30) and some heads 'do not see eye to eye', rendering their role in addressing challenges facing their countries and resolving conflicts compromised. Given the nature of IGAD, a member state can reject any decision without fear of repercussion. Sudan rejected the intervention of the quartet headed by Kenya, and IGAD could not move forward with the quartet's work (Hamid, interview, 23 October 2024; and Naba, interview, 2 November 2024).

7.4 Initiative of neighbouring countries

In July 2023, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi launched his country's mediation initiative by addressing Sudan's neighbours (Assal, 2023). Days after SAF rejected IGAD's quartet mechanism, Egypt convened a regional summit of Sudan's neighbours. The summit agreed to establish a ministerial mechanism at foreign ministers' level to develop a comprehensive action plan to resolve the Sudanese conflict. Egypt is SAF's principal backer, and Sudan and Egypt have a military cooperation agreement. While Egypt can hardly be deemed a neutral mediator, it has the potential to exert pressure on SAF if it so wished (IDEA, 2023). The Egyptian initiative did not make any headway due to lack of trust from the RSF. In October 2024, the leader of the RSF accused Egypt of active involvement in the war through its air strikes on RSF troops (see Reuters, 2024). Like other external initiatives, this one also did not deliver.

The failure of the neighbouring countries' initiatives can be attributed to several key factors, that include: (a) Neighbouring countries are divided and unable to present a unified approach. There was no consensus on Egypt's leadership in the mediation process, with some questioning Egypt's role due to the support it provides for SAF (Hamad, interview, 23 October 2024; and Sami, interview, 23 October 2024). (b) There is no clarity in this initiative and the neighbouring countries lacked sufficient influence to organise effective mediation; the conflict was beyond their capacity to resolve (Zuhair, interview, 24 October 2024; and Samreen, interview, 20 October 2024). (c) The initiative was regarded as driven by Egypt's interests, which undermined the initiative's credibility, rendering it as a response to Egypt's and the neighbouring countries' exclusion from other mediation efforts, particularly IGAD's initiative (Sami, interview, 23 October 2024; and Majak, interview, 26 October 2024). (d) Some neighbouring countries were considered peace spoilers, with their involvement in the conflict complicating efforts to mediate a peaceful resolution. These countries' participation further undermined the initiative's legitimacy and effectiveness (Hamid, interview, 23 October 2024; Fayez, interview, 14 October 2024; and Abdelkarim, interview, 18 November 2024).

8. Conclusion

Sudan has a long history with mediation efforts. Except for the 1997 Peace from Within Agreement, all wars in Sudan were negotiated with the support and

involvement of external mediators. The April 2023 war is no different, except that the different mediation initiatives have not materialised, yet. As analysed in this paper, there were several internal mediation initiatives that also did not succeed. Factors that contributed to the lethargy of the different internal initiatives include the lack of harmony, fragmentation and mistrust among the Sudanese actors behind these initiatives. To explain the difficulties that faced mediation initiatives, it is important to link the empirical data in the paper with the theoretical framework outlined earlier. Walter's (1997) perspective explains why mediation did not work: the antagonists embrace ideational perspectives in outlining their positions, hence deepening internal polarisation. This makes mediation difficult from the perspective of warring parties.

Time is not ripe enough for mediation to succeed, to echo Zartman (2000). The early launching of mediation initiatives, in particular the Jeddah Platform in May 2023, occurred at a time when the RSF held significant strategic and territorial advantage over SAF, effectively controlling large swathes of the country. This asymmetry in power undermined the conditions for ripe negotiations, as the RSF had little or no incentive to compromise, while SAF viewed the talks as a premature and coerced process tantamount to surrender rather than a balanced negotiation. The absence of a mutually hurting stalemate and the stark imbalance in military positioning meant that SAF lacked both the leverage and the perception of a viable way out, leading to limited political will for genuine engagement and diminishing the prospects for meaningful resolution at that stage. Furthermore, SAF and the RSF are bent on continuing the fighting, given the support they continue to receive from internal and external backers. It could be argued that the ripe moment could be procured and external and internal actors' initiatives succeed when support for the warring parties ceases to exist.

Lack of trust is another issue. Once fighting begins, attitudes towards the enemy become fixed in ways that are not easily reversible. Power asymmetries, indivisible stakes, bargaining difficulties, or opposing identities make settlement in civil wars difficult. Sudan represents a case that largely testifies to this claim. This dynamic explains why negotiated settlements often fail, as neither side trusts the other enough to ensure compliance. The key solution to this dilemma is the involvement of a third-party guarantor that can provide security assurances, ensuring the safety of both sides during the critical implementation phase. Without such guarantees, peace agreements are likely to collapse. A historical example is the Sudanese civil

war, where the Anya Nya rebels were unwilling to sign the Addis Ababa peace agreement until Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie personally guaranteed their safety, highlighting the importance of external guarantees in resolving civil wars.

Experiences from similar conflicts also shed light. Verjee (2021) argues that the IGAD mediation related to South Sudan overlooked or oversimplified the multiple, overlapping and competing conceptions of peace held by the mediators who led the process until they stepped down after a peace deal was signed in August 2015. The mediation team comprised multiple institutions, states and officials, each with different values, goals and understanding of peace, which also varied over time. Furthermore, mediation and negotiation, which went on for 18 months, were not successful because belligerents were not committed to a negotiated settlement based on the UN principles of mediation (Assal, 2022).

In Sudan, the different external mediation efforts following the April 2023 war are a continuation of previous initiatives. While actors involved are not always the same, the key players and their approach remain unchanged. The overall mediation process is repeating past efforts with the same ideas and strategies, raising questions about whether a different outcome can be expected from the same approach. Lack of congruity in the different efforts and the habit of forum-shopping undermine mediation and entrench regional and international discord, relegating Sudan to less of a priority despite the egregious humanitarian situation.

External actors often simplify complex crises by supporting one side without fully acknowledging the diversity of political forces at play. This approach tends to overlook the nuanced, multifaceted nature of the situation, which involves various stakeholders with different interests, ideologies and goals. As a result, the complexity of the conflict is ignored, and a one-dimensional perspective can lead to ineffective or misguided interventions.

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