



Sudan's Calamitous War: Finding a Path toward Peace

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What's new? Sudan's vicious civil war rages on, causing enormous human suffering, wiping away state institutions and exporting instability to an already troubled neighbourhood in the Horn of Africa.

Why did it happen? The main belligerents – the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces – came to blows in April 2023 amid a power struggle in Khartoum. Their war has since drawn in additional parties, as the principal players splinter and foreign countries ratchet up support for one side or the other.

What should be done? Although both the main parties have resisted peacemaking efforts, outside actors should keep working toward a ceasefire. They may need to tender a provisional vision for post-war governance that involves difficult compromises on national and military leadership, as well as decentralised authority, while preserving space for civilian party representation.

I. Overview

Attempts to halt Sudan's disastrous war continue to sputter but have never been more urgent. The conflict, which erupted in Khartoum in April 2023 amid a power struggle within the military, has triggered the world's largest humanitarian crisis, displacing nearly ten million people and pushing millions more into severe hunger. The Sudanese army, which holds itself out as sovereign, refused to attend August 2024 peace talks convened by the U.S. in Geneva. Its rival, the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), controls large swathes of the country but struggles to govern them. Wartime atrocities lead many Sudanese to reject both main belligerents as future leaders. As multi-front fighting rages, Sudan is sinking deeper into chaos. Despite the obstacles, outside powers, notably Türkiye, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – with backing from Saudi Arabia and the U.S. – should lean on the parties to come back to the table and agree to a ceasefire. They may need to offer a notional picture of how government and military leadership roles will be allocated, and power split between the centre and periphery, in the post-war order.

After a year and a half of fighting, Sudan's war has exacted a grim toll. Twenty-six million people – more than half the country's pre-war population – are facing acute food shortages. Several urban centres, including much of the capital Khartoum, resemble wastelands. A prolonged siege in North Darfur's largest city, El Fasher, has

trapped more than a million civilians. Like Somalia, which fell apart in the 1990s, Sudan will export its problems to its neighbourhood and beyond, inviting external intervention, for years to come if the warring parties do not quiet their guns soon.

Left to their own devices, the two sides seem likely to keep shooting. Both have received copious amounts of foreign armaments, but neither has been able to deliver a knockout blow. Momentum has shifted a number of times. Prior to July 2024, when fighting slowed due to seasonal rains, the RSF, led by Mohamed Hamdan Daga-lo "Hemedti", had the upper hand, having largely driven the army out of Khartoum and vast additional areas. Then, at the end of the rainy season, the Sudanese army launched offensives on several fronts, leaving the RSF on the back foot. In the first week of January, the army recaptured Wad Medani, capital of Gezira state, the country's breadbasket, in one of its biggest victories to date. The war continues across much of the country, dragging in numerous other armed groups and local militias. Without either a clear victor or a peace deal, it could go on for years, which would be a catastrophe for the Sudanese people and a danger to the country's neighbours.

Efforts to organise peace talks are faltering for several reasons, with key army commanders, including top leader Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, loath to meaningfully engage. Many of them still hope to regain control of Khartoum and compel the RSF to submit to the army's authority. Burhan also rejects including the UAE, which heavily backs the RSF, in the peace process. A deal that bypasses Abu Dhabi looks unachievable, however, given the Gulf power's direct involvement and regional influence.

The outside countries that have led or played a central role in ceasefire discussions should renew efforts to convene the parties for talks (likely behind closed doors, at first, given the bad blood on all sides). Türkiye, which in December 2024 offered itself up as a mediator, appears for now well positioned to marshal talks. Both Abu Dhabi, which heavily supports the RSF (and should press it to engage), and the Sudanese army have accepted Ankara's offer to mediate. Egypt, which backs the army, also has an essential role to play: it should rally behind the Turkish effort, as should the U.S. and Saudi Arabia.

Getting the parties to the table is likely to require the mediators, currently led by Ankara, to offer a vision – in broad strokes, if need be – of how the country will be governed after the war ends. Much as Sudan's citizens deserve to be rid of the army and RSF leaders, who have led the country into devastating conflict, these men will likely insist on arrangements that serve their interests. Ideally, they would step aside for the country's sake, leaving negotiations to surrogates, but if not, the mediators will need to be pragmatic if they are to foster a deal that can stop the fighting. One way or another, there also needs to be room for civilians to gain representation in the post-war order, given how strongly Sudanese object to military domination, which, after all, has brought the country to this point.

Though there is little cause for optimism, perhaps the situation's very bleakness offers some hope. All sides have reason to want the war to end. The RSF is bogged down on many fronts, with no path to outright victory and no ability to govern the territory it has captured. Moreover, it is reviled by many Sudanese, due to its wartime atrocities. The army, too, is widely reported to have committed serious abuses during the war. It will struggle to claw back legitimacy in RSF strongholds and many areas outside the riverine centre. On the battlefield, though the army is gaining, it is ceding more and more authority to the proxy militias and other allies it is relying on to fight.

It will have difficulty recovering the whole of Khartoum, the prize at the country's centre. Finally, though outside countries have divergent interests, the conflict parties' biggest backers should also want to keep Sudan from splintering further. A quieting of the guns could preserve the chances of saving the Sudanese state while eliminating a source of regional instability and preventing greater human misery.

II. A Country Convulsed by Conflict

Sudan's ruinous civil war continues with no end in sight. In late September 2024, after a brief pause during the rainy season, the conflict exploded anew in several areas, including in Khartoum, North Darfur and Sennar. Three months later, in early January, the army retook Wad Medani, capital of Gezira state, which had dramatically fallen to the RSF in December 2023. But while the army has made gains, the RSF has also advanced into new areas, including White Nile and Blue Nile states, bordering South Sudan and Ethiopia, respectively. The overall picture is of a conflict where both sides have recorded significant wins but neither is able to attain a decisive advantage. The country is increasingly divided. Outside assistance to the parties continues to fuel the fighting, convincing the belligerents they can press for further battlefield victories rather than a peaceful resolution.

A. A Surge in Fighting

At the war's onset, the RSF made substantial gains, sweeping through most of western Sudan and seizing control of many parts of the capital. As the fighting continued, the group also took control of extensive areas in central and eastern Sudan, including Wad Medani in Gezira state and much of Sennar state, too. Millions of people were displaced into neighbouring countries, and there was widespread targeting of civilians, including sexual violence primarily against women and girls.

Momentum has now shifted again in favour of the army, which had been losing ground for much of the war. At the end of the rainy season in September 2024, the army launched a multi-pronged offensive in the metropolitan area comprising Khartoum; Bahri, its sprawling northern suburbs; and Omdurman, its sister city on the Nile's west bank. The army took several strategic bridges and lifted the RSF's siege on its Kadaro camp in Bahri.¹ While the RSF launched counterattacks in November, and still holds much of Khartoum and the capital's environs, its grip on those areas now appears shakier. The paramilitary group has also struggled to maintain control of central and eastern Sudan. In late October, Abuagla Keikal, the RSF's top commander in Gezira – which borders Khartoum to the south and is the centre of Sudan's agricultural economy – defected to the army. The RSF responded by reportedly engaging in widespread abuses against communities it accused of supporting Keikal.²

¹ The RSF's primary supply route from Omdurman, which serves as the entry point for weapons shipments from Darfur, now passes over the Jebel Awlia dam bridge, located farther south of Khartoum. This route is highly vulnerable to bombardment by the army, meaning that the RSF is having increasing difficulty reinforcing its positions and provisioning its troops.

² Keikal's defection has strained communal relations in Gezira. After he switched sides, the RSF attacked members of his tribe, killing dozens and engaging in extensive looting. The RSF also raided

The army also made inroads in the east in October and November, particularly in Sennar, winning back territories the RSF had taken in June.³ First, it recaptured the important Jebel Moya area, a transport hub for eastern Sudan, and later in November it took Sinjah, the capital of Sennar. Toward the end of that month, the RSF largely withdrew from the state, shifting its forces farther south to mount offensives in White Nile and Blue Nile states.

The early January recapture of Wad Medani gave the army a major morale boost. Many Sudanese had been shocked when the RSF marched in to this bastion of army support in December 2023. Now the pendulum has swung again. Control changed hands swiftly, with little resistance from the RSF, which pulled out of the city. In a statement, Hemedti claimed that the army's use of Iranian drones had been decisive and vowed to retake the ground his troops had lost.⁴ The RSF has, however, made similar assertions in recent weeks, without being able to follow through. Meanwhile, the army and allied militias reportedly summarily executed civilians seen as hailing from western Sudan – the RSF's stronghold – after retaking Wad Medani. Videos circulated on social media showing soldiers and other armed men killing defenceless people. The army has promised to investigate.⁵

Allied Darfuri armed groups – part of the so-called Joint Darfur Force, which has fought alongside the army since October 2023 – have likewise pushed the RSF on several fronts in Darfur, including in El Fasher (capital of North Darfur) and the Jebel Moun area of West Darfur. The RSF has so far kept them at bay on the last two fronts, but combat continues in North Darfur. In El Fasher, Minni Minawi's Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and Jibril Ibrahim's Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) have made significant advances since September 2024.⁶ Both groups have reportedly mobilised ethnic militias, primarily from among the Zaghawa, including some who have crossed over from Chad to support the offensives.⁷

Outside El Fasher, which is mostly controlled by the RSF, fighting between the paramilitary group and the Joint Darfur Force is raging in several locales to the north and east, including Mellit, Umm Kadada, Kutum, El Kuma and El Zurug. In November

areas whose inhabitants are believed to be involved in recruiting militias aligned with the army. In retaliation, these militias reportedly targeted non-Arab communities, accusing them of supporting the RSF due to their ethnic ties with Darfuri groups. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Gezira residents, October-November 2024. "Dozens killed by paramilitary RSF in Sudan's Gezira, aid groups say", Al Jazeera, 26 October 2024.

³ The RSF's June offensive was halted by the onset of seasonal rains.

⁴ "Sudan's leader admits defeat in Al Jazirah state, vows to fight on", *Sudan Tribune*, 11 January 2023. Western diplomats confirm that Iran has built up a substantial diplomatic and security presence in Port Sudan, where the army-aligned government has its headquarters. It supplied drones to the army throughout 2024 and has offered to train Sudanese drone operators. Crisis Group interviews, January 2025.

⁵ "Sudan's army condemns ethnically targeted killings of civilians in El Gezira", Reuters, 14 January 2025.

⁶ Rainfall is scant in the area, so fighting there continued during July and August. The army's 6th infantry division is still in the city but has participated little in recent combat.

⁷ Additionally, there have been reports of fully armed fighters from both groups returning from Libya in armoured trucks, further bolstering resistance to the RSF in North Darfur. Crisis Group interviews, Darfuris belonging to the Joint Darfur Forces, Cairo, Nairobi, Addis Ababa and by telephone, July, August, September and October 2024.

and early December, the RSF launched counteroffensives in El Fasher, with the conflict spilling into the Zamzam displacement camp, from which the RSF has accused the Joint Darfur Force of launching attacks.⁸

As command of the battlefield ebbs and flows, the war is propelling the country toward further fragmentation. The heart of Khartoum is now a battered war zone, emptied of at least half its population. The rest of the country is being carved up into competing zones of control. The RSF and allied militias dominate much of the territory west of the Nile, but their forces are stretched thin.⁹ The army holds most of the country east and north of Khartoum in the populous Nile valley, relying on a network of popular defence forces and Islamist militias to buttress its own forces.¹⁰ Other armed groups occupy large chunks of land in South Kordofan and Darfur.¹¹

The conflict is also deepening political, ethnic and regional rifts – and many Sudanese, particularly those from the riverine north, have begun to openly discuss the possibility of permanent partition. For some from the Nile regions, separation is seen as a way to avoid the violence and instability that they view as having spread with the RSF's advance, while protecting their political and military interests.¹²

B. *A Complicated Web of Outside Interests*

The power struggle between the army and RSF is inextricable from the external alliances that have both fuelled the war and made it harder to resolve. African, Arab and Western officials widely view the RSF as reliant on support they say flows from the UAE.¹³ The army, meanwhile, has a broader range of allies, with Egypt the most prominent. Cairo, which views Sudan's stability as crucial for its own security vis-à-vis the Nile and the Red Sea coast, has historically had a close relationship with the Sudanese army.¹⁴ Qatar and Türkiye are viewed as sympathising with the army and its Islamist allies, with key Sudanese Islamist figures now residing in Ankara.¹⁵ Iran also has ties to the army and has sold it arms, particularly drones which, according to the RSF,

⁸ "Sudan's famine-hit Zamzam camp comes under fire, say residents and MSF", Reuters, 3 December 2024.

⁹ The RSF is not strong enough to overrun the army's bases without the element of surprise. Some army bases, including in Khartoum, El Obeid and Babanussa in Kordofan, have withstood RSF sieges for a year or more.

¹⁰ While an official committee coordinates arms flows to these various groups, oversight is weak.

¹¹ These groups include the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (Al-Hilu), which controls the Nuba mountains of South Kordofan, and the Sudan Liberation Movement (El-Nur), which holds parts of the Jebel Marra region in central Darfur.

¹² The post-colonial state of Sudan has split once already, in 2011, when South Sudan seceded following a long civil war. Omar al-Bashir's regime, which ruled from 1989 to 2019, acquiesced to partition in part to hang on to power in Khartoum.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Cairo, Doha, Riyadh, Washington and New York, 2023-2024. See also "Final report of UN Panel of Experts on Sudan", S/2024/65, 15 January 2024; and Declan Walsh, "How a U.S. ally uses aid as a cover in war", *The New York Times*, 15 September 2024.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, 2023-2024.

¹⁵ Since the conflict began, Qatari officials have stressed that they view Burhan's administration as Sudan's sovereign government and the RSF as leading an illegitimate rebellion. Turkish officials dispute the notion that they back the army or its Islamist allies, pointing out that senior RSF supporters also live in Türkiye. Crisis Group interviews, Doha and Ankara, 2023-2024.

were of great importance to the army's recent gains.¹⁶ Saudi Arabia has influence over both sides, but it is closer to the army. Riyadh quietly resents Abu Dhabi's deep involvement in Sudan, which it sees as destabilising a neighbour across the Red Sea.¹⁷ In general, army supporters see Saudi Arabia as countering the UAE's growing regional influence.

The UAE and Egypt stand out among external actors, for both their importance in Sudan and the complex dynamic between them. Abu Dhabi and Cairo have considerable leverage over the RSF and the Sudanese army, respectively. The two governments cooperate in other areas, with Egypt highly reliant on the UAE for financial support, which the latter sees as an investment in the stability of a key regional partner. Indeed, the UAE announced a new \$35 billion outlay in Egypt in February 2024. Yet they seem unwilling or unable to find compromise terms on which they would be willing to support an end to the war in Sudan. Egyptian officials have numerous gripes about Emirati ambitions in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region, despite Cairo's own links with Abu Dhabi.¹⁸ The muddled relations between these two regional powers also mean that some in the Sudanese army and especially among Sudanese Islamist leaders harbour distrust of Cairo. They fear the Egyptians are unlikely to go to bat for them against the UAE if that might jeopardise Cairo-Abu Dhabi ties.¹⁹

Sudan's sub-Saharan neighbours should in theory be well positioned to play a role mediating the conflict, but most have compromised their ability to do so. Seeking to protect their own interests or profit from alliances with more powerful external players, nearly all have tilted toward one warring party or the other. While Eritrea backs the army, Ethiopia and Chad, which has allegedly let the UAE ship arms into Sudan from its territory, are aligned more closely with the RSF.²⁰ South Sudan is grappling with an economic crisis caused by the war-related shutdown of the pipeline that carries 75 per cent of its oil for export through Sudan. It has sought to maintain relations with both sides in an effort – so far unsuccessful – to negotiate the restart of oil flows.²¹ But it does not have the resources or regional heft to broker peace between the warring factions in its northern neighbour.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, UN and AU experts and diplomats, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Ankara and by telephone, June-August 2024.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Riyadh, 2023-2024. Crisis Group interviews, Western and African officials engaged with Saudi Arabia on Sudan, 2023-2024.

¹⁸ Besides blaming the UAE for destabilising Sudan, Egypt mistrusts the UAE's strong backing of Ethiopia's government, which Cairo considers its chief adversary in the region due to the long dispute over Nile water usage and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Egypt also opposes Ethiopia's quest to regain access to the Red Sea (which it lost when Eritrea became independent in 1993). Egypt (along with Saudi Arabia) seeks to activate a Red Sea Council composed of Red Sea littoral countries, a configuration that would exclude Ethiopia and the UAE. Crisis Group interviews, Cairo and Riyadh, 2023-2024.

¹⁹ Egyptian officials say Cairo firewalls its Sudan policy from its financial relationship with the UAE. Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, 2024. Senior members of Burhan's camp are wary of Egypt's financial dependence on the UAE, with some arguing they can no longer trust Cairo as an ally. Crisis Group interviews, 2024.

²⁰ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°202, *Chad: Limiting the Impact of the War in Sudan on Ouaddaï*, 14 November 2024.

²¹ Crisis Group Statement, "South Sudan on Edge as Its Neighbour's War Disrupts Oil Exports", 15 May 2024.

In the past, the African Union (AU), which in contrast to the UN rejects the army's claim to be Sudan's legitimate government, would have been expected to take charge of peacemaking. But divisions among member states and competition with the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Horn of Africa regional bloc, have hindered its ability to act. Key AU Commission officials appear more focused on jockeying for leadership roles than on directing the AU's intervention in Sudan.²² Despite organising several rounds of meetings of Sudanese political groups in Addis Ababa, the AU has not marshalled a serious effort at mediating between the warring parties.

III. Sputtering Mediation Efforts

Attempts at halting Sudan's rapid downward spiral have thus far gained little traction. Regional and international actors, including those, like the UAE and Egypt, that are providing material support to one of the belligerents, have participated in these processes, but they have mostly failed to bring the sides together for face-to-face talks. After a time, the U.S. took on a coordinating role, but it was also unable to secure a breakthrough. Lately, it has been more focused on accountability. On 7 January, the State Department said it had determined the RSF had committed genocide during the war, building on an earlier finding that both army and RSF members had perpetrated crimes of international concern.²³ It imposed sanctions on Hemedti, seven RSF companies based in the UAE and an unnamed person it accused of helping procure weapons for the group. It has also determined the army to have twice used chemical weapons.²⁴ For now, both sides continue to fight, seeking further military gains before agreeing to a ceasefire.

A. *Failing to Take Off*

In August 2024, the army rejected an invitation extended by the U.S. for talks with the RSF in Geneva, co-hosted by Saudi Arabia and Switzerland. Representatives from Egypt and the UAE attended as observers.²⁵ Aligning Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE behind a push to end the war had been the focus of months of shuttle diplomacy by U.S. Special Envoy Tom Perriello.²⁶ The army's no-show was a disappoint-

²² Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and AU officials, Addis Ababa, January-December 2024.

²³ "Genocide Determination in Sudan and Imposing Accountability Measures", press release, U.S. Department of State, 7 January 2025. The announcement followed a 2023 U.S. determination that both army and RSF members had committed war crimes, and that RSF members had also committed crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. "War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing Determination in Sudan", press release, U.S. Department of State, 6 December 2023.

²⁴ Declan Walsh and Julian E. Barnes, "Sudan's military has used chemical weapons twice, U.S. officials say", *The New York Times*, 16 January 2025.

²⁵ The U.S. initiative followed humanitarian-focused talks in July 2024 organised by the UN's Sudan envoy, Ramtane Lamamra, with both parties in Geneva, which were also unsuccessful in getting the two sides to talk.

²⁶ At first, Perriello pressed for the Jeddah talks to be reconvened, with Egypt and the UAE, which had previously been excluded, invited as observers. When the army resisted this idea, he pivoted to organising U.S.-led talks in Switzerland.

ment, but the meeting nevertheless served an important purpose: it helped facilitate the restart of aid flows via the Chadian border, a major humanitarian corridor that Burhan's government had previously refused the UN permission to use.²⁷

Geneva also represented a shift in diplomatic dynamics around Sudan. Previously, Saudi Arabia (in coordination with the U.S.) had been the main convener of talks, beginning in May 2023 and leading to the signing of the Jeddah Declaration that month.²⁸ The Declaration includes pledges by both sides to allow unrestricted humanitarian access, prevent attacks on non-combatants and protect civilian buildings such as hospitals from military occupation. It was rapidly violated by both sides, and the mediators suspended the talks. They did not meet again until late that October.²⁹

The second round of Jeddah talks resulted in the inking of confidence-building measures, with Saudi mediators also drafting a preliminary agreement outlining critical de-escalation terms.³⁰ Yet, by early December 2023, these negotiations had also broken down. The RSF said the army had not honoured promises it had made, as part of the confidence-building measures, to arrest former officials of the National Congress Party (NCP), the Islamist formation that ruled Sudan under strongman Omar al-Bashir until April 2019, and to remove Islamist leaders from its ranks. The RSF also pointed to disagreements that had arisen over territorial control and the timing of the political process meant to follow a ceasefire.³¹ The army said the talks failed because the RSF wanted to maintain a military role for Hemedti; its leaders, for their part, demanded that Hemedti fully integrate the RSF into the armed forces and assume a purely political position. The army also insisted that the RSF evacuate Khartoum before any agreement could be signed.³²

Negotiations resumed secretly in January 2024 in Manama, Bahrain, soon after the RSF captured Wad Medani. Facilitated by the Egyptian and Emirati intelligence services, with the participation of Saudi and U.S. officials, the talks included in-person meetings between Abdelrahim Dagalo, Hemedti's deputy (and brother) and Shams al-Din Kabbashi, Burhan's deputy. The sides agreed to arrest certain individuals

²⁷ The U.S., via Cairo, pressed the army hard to show up, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken even offering to attend if the army brass sent a senior delegation. All these efforts failed to persuade the army to engage. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. diplomats, July-September 2024.

²⁸ "Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan", U.S. Department of State, 11 May 2023.

²⁹ Efforts to reconvene talks were complicated by the different expectations the U.S. and Saudi Arabia had of mediation. The U.S. sought a humanitarian ceasefire as a precursor to a broader political process, while Saudi Arabia advocated for a more comprehensive deal to halt hostilities. Meanwhile, Riyadh rejected a U.S. request to include Egypt at the talks. Crisis Group interviews, senior U.S. officials, Washington and by telephone, 2023.

³⁰ These included a cessation of all fighting, a halt to bombing and a suspension of army repositioning, resupply efforts and recruitment drives. Additionally, the draft stipulated that all armed forces be evacuated from residential areas and hospitals to designated camps, in line with the humanitarian guidelines established in the Jeddah Declaration.

³¹ The RSF claimed control of Khartoum and Darfur, while the army said it held only checkpoints and not the entire regions. Crisis Group interviews, RSF representatives, Addis Ababa, December 2023.

³² Crisis Group telephone interviews, representatives of the army-aligned government in Port Sudan and representatives of armed groups allied with the army, December 2023.

from exchanged lists and to reconstitute a unified army from their respective forces.³³ The discussions stalled, however, and Burhan then recalled Kabbashi after news of their taking place appeared in the Sudanese media.

Other tracks seemed promising at first before petering out. These included an effort by African heads of state, under IGAD's aegis, to bring Burhan and Hemedti face to face in Djibouti in December 2023. Hemedti appears to have pulled out of the scheduled meeting at the last minute. Burhan then withdrew Sudan from IGAD entirely in protest of engagement with Hemedti by IGAD members, including Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya, in effect killing the bloc's initiative.

The AU's Peace and Security Council made little headway, due to divisions among its members. Uganda's president leads a panel of heads of state mandated by the Council to bring the belligerents together. In June 2024, while holding the Council's rotating chair, Uganda tried and failed to convene talks. Egypt apparently did not support the initiative, perceiving Kampala as too close to the RSF.³⁴ In October, during its own term as chair, Egypt organised a visit by the fifteen-member Council to Port Sudan, where the army-aligned government has its temporary seat. It argued that the AU should readmit Sudan to membership – a status the AU had suspended following the 2021 military takeover – if Burhan agreed to form a civilian-led government. But this proposal, apparently aimed at enticing Burhan to participate in talks, fell flat in the Council, which considers the general's claim to political leadership of Sudan illegitimate.³⁵

B. *The Key Roadblocks*

All the mediation efforts have eventually run up against the same barrier: the army has pulled out of any track that gains traction, while publicly vowing not to negotiate with the RSF. The RSF has said it is ready to participate in talks. But some of its demands, including those related to the army's future and Hemedti's status in a post-war government, are probably non-starters.

The army has balked at cutting a deal for three major reasons. First, the army and its supporters want to further strengthen their hand militarily before seriously engaging with the RSF.³⁶ Secondly, the army strongly objects to any mediation format that appears to put it and the RSF on an equal footing. Debates over protocol (with the army demanding recognition as Sudan's government and the RSF demanding that both be treated the same) have derailed several mediation attempts – including the U.S. drive for talks in Geneva in August 2024.³⁷ Thirdly, the army has objected to the presence of UAE representatives at talks.

³³ The lists were made up of individuals whom the RSF and army sought to arrest for their role in the conflict or for political reasons. For example, the RSF included a number of high-profile Islamists whom they see as major rivals. Crisis Group interviews, RSF representatives, January 2024.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, regional diplomats, June–September 2024.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, AU diplomat, Addis Ababa, December 2024.

³⁶ Burhan and other key generals have repeatedly demanded that the RSF pull out of Khartoum (and, until the army retook it, Wad Medani) as a precondition for talks.

³⁷ The U.S. has wavered on whether to acknowledge Burhan as de facto head of state. At first, it invited Burhan to attend the Geneva talks in his capacity as head of the army. It later sent an amended version of the invitation with a more expansive title. State Department readouts of calls between Blinken and Burhan in August named the general as head of the sovereign council. "Secretary Blinken's Call with

The army's intransigence is also a function of Burhan's weak grip on a divided wartime coalition that lacks consensus on a path forward.³⁸ One group of army officers, sometimes described as the "institutionalists", are amenable to peace efforts, largely in hopes of saving the army. The most prominent figure in this faction is Kab-bashi, Burhan's deputy. But they are countered by influential generals and prominent leaders in the intelligence services, who reject the notion of peace talks, largely for the reasons noted above. Burhan himself appears hesitant to accept a ceasefire that could splinter his wartime coalition and leave him even weaker. He is particularly loath to enter an agreement that does not define or guarantee his future role in the country. Many suspect that Burhan is using the army's internal divisions as an excuse to avoid negotiations he feels will lead to his removal as head of state or force him into a power-sharing deal.³⁹

Against this backdrop, Burhan's representatives have come to prefer back-channel negotiations with RSF to avoid publicity that could cause a rupture between him and part of his fragile coalition, particularly the Islamists – in turn risking his ouster or a split in the army. In July 2024, Burhan spoke by telephone with Emirati leader Mohammed bin Zayed, following a surprise visit by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (a UAE ally) to Port Sudan. Burhan's camp was angry that Abu Dhabi publicised the call, embarrassing the general at home, where the UAE is considered foreign enemy number one by his wartime supporters. Burhan later spurned an Egyptian attempt to host an in-person meeting with bin Zayed.⁴⁰

Besides the army brass, there are other influential individuals, groups and factions that fiercely oppose peace talks. Burhan has grown increasingly reliant on former Bashir-era officials to run his government, as well as to mobilise militias to fight the RSF. These individuals form the core of Sudan's resurgent Islamic Movement. The alliance, however, is unstable. Many Islamists believe that, should a peace deal be struck, they will be squeezed out of it and the subsequent political arrangement, losing their influence in the political, economic and military spheres.⁴¹ Their response to any ceasefire agreement Burhan might sign is hard to predict. Some Bashir-era Islamists suggest they might attempt to remove Burhan if they disagree with the truce's terms, especially if he were to meet the RSF's major demands, including arresting Islamist leaders, disbanding their militias and removing top military officers affiliated with the Islamic Movement.⁴²

The involvement in the conflict of Darfuri armed groups, particularly the SLA and JEM, has created an additional challenge for ceasefire negotiations. These groups

Head of the Sovereign Council of Sudan Abdel Fattah al-Burhan", U.S. Department of State, 14 August 2024.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, Riyadh, Washington, Nairobi and by telephone, 2024. Even Egyptian and Saudi officials privately express frustration with Burhan's leadership.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, former NCP members, Sudanese diplomats and Sudanese party officials, Addis Ababa, Nairobi, Cairo and Istanbul, July, August, September and November 2024.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Western, Arab, Sudanese and UN officials, Addis Ababa, Nairobi, Doha, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, Cairo, Brussels and New York, July-August 2024.

⁴¹ The Islamic Movement played a key role in Bashir's NCP. Its influence extended to the security forces, including the National Intelligence and Security Service, and economic entities like the Sudanese Company for Construction and Development, which benefited from state contracts.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, former NCP officials and Islamists, Cairo, Addis Ababa and Istanbul, August, September and November 2024.

now demand inclusion in the talks. The army, which represents these Darfuri factions, agrees. The RSF, however, insists it will withdraw from talks if any group other than the army is allowed in. Minawi and other army-aligned Darfuris lobbied heavily against Burhan sending a delegation to Geneva, though it is unclear how much impact they had on the general's decision to boycott.⁴³

Poor relations between Burhan and the U.S. have also hindered negotiations, making it more difficult for Washington to broker an accord. U.S. officials had struggled to speak with Burhan in person due to security restrictions that (until a surprise meeting in Port Sudan in November 2024) barred U.S. officials from leaving the Port Sudan airport.⁴⁴ (Burhan, for his part, declined to meet U.S. emissaries at the airport.) Top U.S. officials have thus mostly had to resort to stilted telephone conversations with Burhan, relying on interlocutors such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia to try to convince him to return to peace talks.

Finally, the RSF presents its own set of challenges. It is unclear how flexible (or not) the outfit's leaders would be during negotiations should the army relent and give peace talks a try. As mentioned earlier, the RSF has insisted that Sudan recruit a new army altogether and resisted demands to pull out of urban areas unless the army does so as well. Finding a role for Hemedti will also prove a sticking point. Hemedti has told diplomats he is willing to forgo a position in a new government, allowing civilian supporters to represent the RSF in a political process.⁴⁵

C. Enter the Turks

In December 2024, Türkiye, an important regional actor with its own longstanding interests in Sudan, signalled it was keen to find a way out of the conflict.⁴⁶ On 13 December, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called Burhan and indicated Ankara's wish to serve as mediator. In a nod to the army's reluctance to engage directly with the RSF, readouts from Ankara outlined talks would involve engagement between authorities in Port Sudan and the UAE.

Ankara may at first glance appear to be an unlikely candidate to mediate. Türkiye has for the past decade had testy relations with the UAE. Abu Dhabi blamed Ankara for supporting the 2011 Arab uprisings, which brought governments associated with the Muslim Brotherhood (the Islamist group which, historically, the UAE has regarded as an enemy) to power. Until a recent thaw, Turkish-Egyptian relations were also icy, particularly as many Muslim Brotherhood critics of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's regime had found a home in Ankara. Despite the improvement in relations,

⁴³ The army's failure to send representatives to the U.S.-led Geneva talks was partly due to disputes over the inclusion of Darfuri armed groups. The delegation that met with Perriello on Burhan's behalf in Jeddah on 9 August 2024, ahead of the Geneva talks, was led by Mohamed Bashir Abu Namo, the minister of minerals. Abu Namo is reportedly related to Minawi and was speaking for the army-aligned government rather than the army itself.

⁴⁴ In November 2024, Perriello and his team were able to leave the airport and meet with Burhan at his office.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Western and regional diplomats, June-December 2024.

⁴⁶ The mediation offer came soon after Türkiye had brokered an agreement that helped lower the volume in the volatile territorial dispute between Ethiopia and Somalia. "Türkiye's Erdogan offers to mediate Sudan-UAE disputes", Al Jazeera, 13 December 2024. For background on that dispute, see Crisis Group Commentary, "The Stakes in the Ethiopia-Somaliland Deal", 6 March 2024.

Cairo regards Turkish designs on Sudan with suspicion. It particularly objected to a 2017 offer by the Bashir regime to offer Ankara operational control of the Sudanese port of Suakin, which lies across the Red Sea from Saudi Arabia and was a trade hub in the Ottoman era.⁴⁷

Ankara appears to have engaged in considerable diplomatic preparation, however, and thus far has avoided rejection by any of the key actors. The RSF has yet to comment on the Turkish initiative, but both the army and the UAE appear to have cautiously welcomed it – with some in the army seeming to prefer Ankara to Cairo, in part because of the latter's high level of economic dependency on Abu Dhabi.⁴⁸ Moreover, Türkiye's close ties with hardline Bashir-era Islamists, close allies of Burhan's during the war, could prove a game changer, given Islamist resistance to peace efforts thus far. The army chief, for his part, has reaffirmed his support for Turkish-led mediation.⁴⁹

Although this latest diplomatic activity is welcome, it is likely to run into familiar obstacles, as outlined below. It is unclear, moreover, if Türkiye envisions mediating directly between the army and the RSF, or only between the army and the UAE.

IV. Reaching a Ceasefire

In order to reach a ceasefire and find a way out of the conflict, the outside actors with the biggest stakes in Sudan's civil war will need to exert greater pressure on their Sudanese allies to choose a path to peace. Success will likely prove elusive unless mediators can offer at least a broad-strokes vision of the post-war political order in Sudan that explains how the conflict parties (and other key Sudanese actors) will fit in. Although the details may have to be worked out by a caretaker government, it may be useful for mediators to present overarching ideas to guide discussion, while offering suggestions for how the parties might thread the needle in certain especially sensitive areas.

A. *Marshalling More Coherent Mediation*

Given that there is no sign of the parties or their backers reaching an accord on their own, a more intensive mediation approach is necessary. Right now, Ankara seems best placed to lead such an effort to broker a deal between the army and Abu Dhabi, the RSF's chief patron. That initiative deserves the support of the other major powers involved, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the U.S.

While Saudi Arabia and the U.S. have played central mediation roles, neither appears to have great momentum right now. Saudi Arabia has influence with both

⁴⁷ "Turkey to restore Sudanese Red Sea port and build naval base", Reuters, 26 December 2017.

⁴⁸ On 25 December, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan telephoned his Emirati counterpart Abdullah bin Zayed. Shortly afterward, the UAE announced that it was "ready to cooperate and coordinate with Türkiye" to find a solution to the conflict. "UAE Supports Diplomatic Efforts to Resolve Crisis in Sudan", UAE Foreign Ministry, 28 December 2024. Days later, Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister Burhanettin Duran met with Burhan in Port Sudan. Senior army officers have signalled enthusiasm for the mediation track steered by Ankara. Crisis Group interviews, January 2025.

⁴⁹ "Sudan welcomes Turkish mediation, seeks economic ties", *Sudan Tribune*, 4 January 2025.

the army and the RSF, and it wants to give the Jeddah track another go, but there is no reason to expect future Jeddah rounds to produce better results than past ones. As for the U.S., President Donald Trump's return to office will likely bring a recalibration of approach, but precisely what change is unclear; in the meantime, the new administration should make clear that the U.S. is not to be discounted as a diplomatic force. To this end, appointing a new special envoy straight away would be a step that would help Washington preserve its influence. (The clearest route to ending the war would be a concerted push from the White House for its Arab allies to strike a deal halting hostilities. But the lack of such high-level interest in Sudan hindered efforts under the Biden administration and, at present, there is no indication that the Trump team will see things any differently.)

The challenges that Türkiye is facing are substantial, to say the least. Beyond the parties' failure to show much interest in the peace process to date, the array of competing outside interests will be difficult to reconcile. Yet overcoming this obstacle is likely to be essential. For instance, no matter how much momentum the Ankara initiative may appear to have at present, it will struggle to make progress without active cooperation by the UAE and Egypt – and, right now, Abu Dhabi and Cairo have major differences. Egyptian officials make clear that the Sudanese army can never accept a ceasefire without control of Khartoum, adding that the army and RSF should not be treated as equals. They prefer to frame the conflict as pitting a national army against a rebel group. In contrast, Emirati officials say the Sudanese army is not a legitimate government and have at times suggested that Sudan needs a new army.⁵⁰

Still, the task is not hopeless, if only because there is ample reason for both Egypt and the UAE to reconsider their current positions and turn their energies toward making a new round of ceasefire talks possible:

- ❑ First, neither of them wants to allow a substantial number of former NCP Islamists to return to power in a post-war government – a result that becomes more likely the longer the war drags on and the more dependent Burhan becomes on them.
- ❑ Secondly, both have an interest in closing out a bloody conflict that is destabilising a region where they have much at stake. The UAE has undertaken substantial economic ventures in Sudan, including in agriculture and gold mining.⁵¹ Before the war's onset, it signed multi-billion-dollar deals aimed at developing a new port on the Red Sea, and it also acquired extensive agricultural holdings.⁵² All these investments will be imperilled by continued war. As for Egypt, its reason for wanting a stable Sudan is more straightforward. Amid the devastation in Gaza and the tenuous no-war, no peace situation in Libya, a collapsing Sudan is an additional headache that Cairo does not need.

⁵⁰ They also say they want a civilian government and express their support for former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, who leads a large Sudanese anti-war political coalition, Taqaddum, and runs an Abu Dhabi-based think-tank. Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, Abu Dhabi and New York, 2023-2024.

⁵¹ Declan Walsh, "The gold rush at the heart of a civil war", *The New York Times*, 11 December 2024. See also John Prendergast and Anthony Lake, "The UAE's secret war in Sudan", *Foreign Affairs*, 31 July 2024.

⁵² "Sudan to develop Red Sea port in \$6-bln initial pact with Emirati group", Reuters, 13 December 2022. The port project was cancelled in November 2023, with Sudan's army-aligned finance minister accusing the UAE of supporting the RSF.

- ❑ Thirdly, both Cairo and especially Abu Dhabi can only begin to address the reputational damage that each has incurred by dint of involvement in the war by making a serious effort to end it.⁵³

Parties that have strong ties to Egypt and the UAE – including Saudi Arabia, the U.S. and the European Union – should strongly encourage them to chart a path toward peace, for these and other reasons.

To provide maximum diplomatic heft, Ankara's initiative and any that come after it should also afford space for the group of outside envoys who are working intensively on the conflict and who have developed their own relationships with the key players.⁵⁴ The UN and AU envoys, Ramtane Lamamra and Mohamed Ibn Chambas, who have direct access to both sides, should continue their engagement within this new framework, as should the European envoys working on the file, helping articulate the positions and interests of both sides and their supporters.

B. Requirements for a Post-war Government

The first objective of peace talks is to bring an immediate end to the fighting that is causing such misery and destroying what is left of the Sudanese state. For ceasefire discussions to have the best odds of success, Türkiye (or any other lead mediator that might emerge) will need to lay out, and seek buy-in for, a practical vision for what will come next. Such an exercise will allow the warring parties, their backers and other interested actors to understand how their interests can be protected when the fighting stops.

In terms of what vision to put forward, there will likely have to be two phases of governance after a ceasefire. Any settlement will likely bear echoes of the post-Bashir transitional setup, which was disastrously brought to an abrupt halt by the October 2021 army-RSF coup. First would be an interim period during which a broad-based caretaker government would wield power. The precise make-up of such an entity would need to be arrived at through consultation and negotiation, but it would almost surely need to encompass both belligerents and non-belligerents, the latter selected from the main civilian political groupings. While the main conflict actors would ideally be sidelined, given what they have put the country through, it is hard to imagine that such arrangements could cohere without their participation. Mediators should favour a pragmatic approach that quiets the guns.

While, based on prior statements, it is possible that the army will continue to insist that RSF pull out of Khartoum as a precondition for talks, mediators should discour-

⁵³ While the UAE has received heavy criticism for its alleged support for the RSF, and has raised its diplomatic activity to push back against the claims, the scrutiny appears to have made little difference to its overall strategy. Hopes among Sudanese that the U.S. could convince the UAE to shift its support away from the RSF appear misplaced. Washington is unlikely to put pressure on the UAE, given the number of other important equities embedded in the relationship, as indicated in the lengthy new joint strategy document announced during a U.S.-Emirati presidential meeting in Washington. See "U.S.-UAE Joint Leaders' Statement Dynamic Strategic Partners", White House, 23 September 2024. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, 2023-2024.

⁵⁴ These diplomats include EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa Annette Weber, Switzerland's Horn envoy, Sylvain Astier, Norway's newly appointed regional envoy, Endre Stiansen, and Germany's envoy, Heiko Nitzschke.

age it from doing so, not least because of the challenges in arriving at a dispensation agreeable to both sides.⁵⁵

Looking further out at the horizon, the second phase of post-war governance would involve a return to constitutional rule, a proposal again borrowing from the constitutional framework the generals jettisoned with their putsch. Mediators could put forward the notional contours of this system, leaving them to be fleshed out by the caretaker body. In order to give any system that emerges from this process its best chance for success, it will need to address the problems that set off the war to begin with, including how to constitute a unified, more representative army. For better or worse, this issue is given added salience by the fact that the military has traditionally played a major role in the country's economy – enriching its senior figures – and has outsourced much of its responsibility for security to locally recruited militias in conflict-affected regions.⁵⁶

The post-war government will also need to articulate a more inclusive governing vision: it is hard to see how Sudan can avoid adopting a model involving substantial decentralisation going forward, given that decades of exclusionary governance from the riverine centre lies at the core of Sudan's perpetual instability.⁵⁷

As they grapple with these overarching challenges, those designing such a government will have to negotiate three main elements. First, how will the interests of the two main warring parties – including Burhan and Hemedti – be represented? The RSF will insist on having assurances about its future role in Sudan before ceding key military positions, especially in Khartoum. The army, meanwhile, has made clear it wants to keep ruling the country, a prospect that many, including the RSF, reject. Optimally, military and paramilitary figures would rethink their demands, step back and allow civilians to take control. At present, however, that seems plausible only if the blueprint for post-war governance grants sufficient prerogatives to surrogates whom they trust to protect what they have at stake.

Secondly, members of groups that are involved in the war but are not a part of the army or RSF will also need to see that they have a political future. Most important among these are the Islamist former NCP leaders, including a significant number from the army, intelligence agencies and civil service, who have used the conflict to reassert their position. Complicating matters, the UAE has signalled that it sees a non-Islamist government as a prerequisite for a post-war settlement.⁵⁸

It will be necessary to tread a narrow path between excluding the Islamists – and failing to gain their backing for a political process – and including them but losing

⁵⁵ The capital has been the most consistently contested part of the country since April 2023, and withdrawing armed forces from the city's streets would be symbolically important. The RSF has said it is ready to withdraw but that the army should also leave, a proposal the army rejects. A middle ground could be that both confine themselves to designated bases in and around Khartoum, with police or an outside force providing security in the capital. The army made the RSF's unilateral withdrawal from Khartoum a major precondition for talks, but mainly at a time when its leaders thought it might be able to retake the city after the rains. That scenario is no longer realistic.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group Commentary, "Sudan: Rebooting an Endangered Transition", 31 January 2023.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group has made this argument several times over the years, dating back to well before the Bashir regime's downfall. See, eg, Crisis Group Africa Report N°154, *Sudan: Major Reform or More War*, 29 November 2012.

⁵⁸ Crisis Groups interviews, Arab, African and Western officials, Abu Dhabi, Addis Ababa, Nairobi and Washington, 2023-2024.

the support of many civilian groups as well as that of the UAE and thus, potentially, the RSF. A way forward might be to guarantee that the caretaker government that emerges from negotiations will permit figures who accept the need for reform and support a ceasefire to participate in post-transition politics, such as by forming parties and running in elections. Again, this compromise will be a bitter pill to swallow for the millions of Sudanese civilians who – correctly – blame Bashir's regime for the country's mire, including its rigged, sclerotic economy and the epic misgovernance that paved the way to war by unleashing several militias, most prominently the RSF.

In the same vein, it will also be important to maintain lines of communication with the groups that make up the Joint Darfur Force – reassuring them that their interests are being adequately protected so that they temper their opposition to a peaceful settlement.⁵⁹

Thirdly, plans for the post-war political order will need to include space for Sudan's civilian political parties and civil society, including opportunities for women's political participation, which has diminished during the conflict. Leaders from these groups should be encouraged to form a united front to participate in a post-war government. Here, mediators and members of a future caretaker government should draw on the recommendations that emerged from the July 2024 meeting of key politicians organised by Egypt in Cairo and the AU's consultations with Sudanese political groups in Addis Ababa.⁶⁰ Beginning now to forge greater unity among Sudan's divided politicians about a political path forward could have the added benefit of placing more pressure on the belligerents for peace.

Admittedly, any deal to end the war in this way will involve an untidy compromise that will disappoint many Sudanese who are revolted by the RSF and army alike for plunging the country into a horrific conflict. But the failure to entertain such bargains could mean months or even years more of fruitless diplomacy, conflict and fragmentation.

V. Conclusion

Sudan's civil war pits against each other two belligerents who seemingly lack the means to win, the willingness to compromise or any regard for the misery their conduct is leaving in its wake. But that does not mean that diplomacy aimed at ending the war is doomed to fail. Despite the RSF's early successes, it has no road to military victory and cannot govern the areas it has conquered. Nor does the army have any easy path to regain much of the territory it has lost, including the majority of Khartoum that lies under RSF control. Türkiye's mediation initiative is more than welcome, but it will also be critical for the outside actors with greatest influence over the conflict parties

⁵⁹ These groups have demanded inclusion in negotiations, and their relations with the Sudanese army are becoming increasingly tense.

⁶⁰ The AU's High-Level Panel on Sudan, chaired by Mohamed Ibn Chambas, organised two preparatory meetings in Addis Ababa in July and August 2024 to engage Sudanese political groupings about the principles of an intra-Sudanese political dialogue. The consultations suffered due to boycotts from several leading groups, including Taqaddum, the coalition led by Hamdok. A joint document outlining recommendations for the dialogue was produced, but several prominent groups did not sign it.

– and who have good reason to want the war to end – to acknowledge that there is no military solution. They should push the parties to come back to the table, giving peace a chance while it might still be possible to put Sudan back together again.

The alternative looks hellish. Left unchecked, Sudan's war will only spread, engulfing more of the country and maybe soon expanding beyond its borders. In that scenario, no one would win, and many would lose.

Nairobi/Brussels, 21 January 2025

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International Crisis Group

Headquarters

Avenue Louise 235, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office

newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office

washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office

london@crisisgroup.org

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