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POLICY BRIEF

# THE ONGOING WAR IN SUDAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SECURITY AND STABILITY OF THE HORN OF AFRICA AND BEYOND



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*This policy paper examines the ongoing violent conflicts in Sudan, focusing particularly on the war that erupted on April 15, 2023, between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The analysis highlights the backdrop of this conflict, which stems from a failed transition to democracy following the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019. Initially marked by optimism, the power-sharing agreement between military and civilian factions quickly unraveled, culminating in a military coup in October 2021. This coup stymied democratic processes and exacerbated rivalries among military leaders, especially between General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the SAF and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti") of the RSF.*

*Their struggle for dominance has transformed cities like Khartoum into battlegrounds, resulting in a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented scale. Over 8.5 million people have been displaced, and the conflict has led to severe shortages of food and healthcare. Economically, the war has devastated Sudan's economy, causing an estimated loss of \$15 billion and driving poverty rates to alarming levels, with 65.6% of the population living below the poverty line by the end of 2023. Furthermore, the conflict poses a risk of further destabilizing neighboring countries as refugees flood into fragile states, creating opportunities for organized crime and extremist groups to gain a foothold.*

*Efforts to restore peace have seen limited success. Diplomatic initiatives led by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), supported by external powers such as Saudi Arabia and the U.S., have struggled to secure lasting ceasefires or address the underlying political issues. Key obstacles include fragmented peace processes, external influences that favor specific agendas, and a lack of genuine inclusivity among Sudanese political actors.*

*The conflict not only threatens Sudan's stability but also poses significant risks to regional security and humanitarian conditions. This paper emphasizes the urgent need for a comprehensive peace process led by the African Union, integrating all stakeholders to address the root causes of the conflict. Current diplomatic efforts have largely fallen short, often influenced by external interests that do not align with the needs of the Sudanese populace. The escalating violence risks spilling over into neighboring countries, raising concerns about broader regional instability and organized crime. A coordinated approach that prioritizes genuine dialogue and stability is essential for fostering peace in Sudan and the surrounding Horn of Africa region.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Violent conflicts and civil strife are political realities in post-independence Sudan, leading the country to lose permanently its former southern territory (now South Sudan), after a referendum in 2011. Moreover, a combination of violent civil conflicts and army coup d'états has hampered attempts to transition and build democratic governance in Sudan. More than six decades after Sudan achieved its independence, the detrimental effects of conflicts and civil strife in the country remain unabated, and now pose an existential threat to state survival. The country is currently experiencing crippling and tumultuous political turmoil, marked by a fierce and bitter war that ignited on April 15, 2023, mainly between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by Abdul Fattah al-Burhan, and a paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Force (RSF), headed by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti").

The potential collapse of Sudan as a functioning state would have detrimental repercussions for not only the country and the Sudanese people, but also the wider region and beyond. The push to restore peace, order, and stability in Sudan presupposes an understanding of the ongoing conflict's significance, impact, and implications for domestic, regional, and international peace, security, and stability.

What is behind the violent conflict between the SAF and RSF? Why has the government of Sudan (or SAF) failed to avert the dangerously consequential nationwide violence? What attempts have been made to work towards a peaceful end to the conflict? What is the regional effect of the conflict between the two warring parties? What are the implications of the ongoing conflict for the security and stability of the Horn of Africa region and beyond? This paper investigates how the country's security architecture has been undermined by state-parallel paramilitaries, leading to full-fledged war and a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented scale, which threatens not only Sudan's stability but also poses significant risks to regional security and humanitarian conditions. It also explores the significance, prospects, challenges, and implications of the ongoing war.

## 2. BACKGROUND TO THE 2023 SUDAN CIVIL WAR

Sudan has faced continuous political violence and conflicts since gaining independence (Johnson, 2016). Most recently, war started on April 15, 2023, between two former allies, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Force (RSF). This conflict arose after President Al-Bashir was removed from power by military allies on April 11, 2019, in response to a peaceful revolution against his regime (Awad, 2022; Mustasilta, 2019). There was hope for democracy and a united Sudan after a power-sharing agreement was signed on August 7, 2019, between the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and the opposition Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) (United Nations, 2022). This agreement aimed to create a three-year transitional government ahead of democratic elections. However, Sudan's political transition has stalled due to the inability of key political groups to agree, including the military, opposition forces, and civil society groups (Tossell, 2020). The political process was further disrupted by a military coup in 2021 and the ongoing conflict between ASF and RSF. These conflicts reflect the struggle among Sudan's leaders, with different interests and priorities, preventing a smooth transition to democracy.

The October 25, 2021, military coup in Sudan was a major obstacle to the country's path to

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democracy (Eltayeb, 2022). The military coup dissolved the post-Al-Bashir power-sharing agreement, leading to a state of emergency and the arrests of Prime Minister Hamdok and civilians. Army leader al-Burhan formed a new council without key political voices, halting democratic progress. This upheaval harmed lives and the economy, dashing hopes for democracy. However, al-Burhan agreed to civilian rule on November 21, 2021, with elections planned for July 2023. Released civilians saw Hamdok reinstated, but he resigned on January 2, 2022. These events illustrate Sudan's democratic challenges amid military interference, unrest, and economic difficulties.

Against this background, Sudan's security architecture during the transition process has been marred by divisions between the SAF and the paramilitary RSF. The monopoly on violence (Dusza, 1989; Krahnmann, 2009; Wulf 2011) is fragmented due to a relative balance of capabilities and interests between the SAF and the paramilitary RSF. Contentious issues such as transitional justice, accountability, and security reforms, including the integration of the Rapid Support Forces, were discussed during a meeting of military and civilian leaders in November 2021 and these issues were part of a plan to return to civilian-led government by January 2023 (Reuters, 2023).

One big problem was the divide between the regular army and the RSF over integrating forces as part of the political transition process to establish a civil state in Sudan following the 2019 removal of long-ruling leader Omar al-Bashir. By April 2023, tensions had risen between these groups over merging, with accusations flying from both sides. General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti), the country's deputy and head of the RSF paramilitary group, criticized Al-Burhan for the 2021 coup, while the army warned of dangerous times ahead. The strong disagreement between the two military leaders led to fierce fighting starting on April 15, 2023, turning into a full-on war. Khartoum, the capital, became a war zone, and it rapidly spreading nationwide so the army moved its main operations to Port Sudan.

Although the failed political transition, military coup, integration, and control issues of the Rapid Support Force are among the key reasons of the current conflict in Sudan, Al-Burhan and his rival from the RSF are primarily fighting for legitimacy and support as the true leaders of Sudan (Espanol, 2024). Now, the war is not just about control of strategic cities and towns but about a struggle for leadership legitimacy between General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the SAF and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti") of the RSF, with each side fighting to prove their claim as the rightful leaders of Sudan. The war has continued unabated into 2024, resulting in humanitarian crisis of unprecedented scale and creating a severe food and healthcare shortage. Economically, the conflict has decimated Sudan's economy, and soaring poverty rates. Given the legacies of military rule and intrastate conflicts in Sudan, and the fact that both warring sides were evenly matched in terms of power and goals, the recent violent escalation may lead the country not only back to authoritarian rule and state fragmentation but is also affecting the neighboring countries in the region. Moreover, Sudan has become a battleground for proxy conflicts involving regional players such as Egypt, Iran, and the UAE, as external powers compete for influence and resources in the country. This geopolitical rivalry further complicates the situation, raising fears that the conflict could spill over into neighboring countries like Ethiopia and Eritrea, potentially escalating into a broader regional war. Addressing this intertwined humanitarian, economic, and security challenges is crucial for stabilizing Sudan and the greater Horn of Africa.

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### 3. REGIONAL EFFECT OF THE WAR

The conflict between the SAF and RSF since April 2023 continues to spread across Sudan, affecting the region and neighboring countries. One spillover effect is the internal displacement and cross-border flow of Sudanese seeking safety in neighboring nations. The conflict's intensity has forced millions to flee within and outside Sudan. According to the United Nation's World Food Program (February 2024), the conflict in Sudan has created one of the world's largest displacement crises internally and abroad since April 2023. By September 2024, UNHCR reported 11, 277,221 million displaced, with 2,907,470 million in Chad, South Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Central African Republic (UNHCR, September 29, 2024). The International Organization for Migration's October 2 report estimated 10.8 million displaced, including 2.3 million in neighboring countries (IOM, October 2, 2024). On the other hand, an estimated 24.8 million people, half of the Sudanese population need humanitarian assistance (23 September 2024, OCHA). Despite UNHCR and partners providing aid to refugees, the cross-border influx to neighboring countries is straining host nations. Fragile neighboring countries also face worsened crises due to existing displacements. In addition to tens of thousands of lives lost because of the violence, this displacement—the world's largest displacement crisis (Sen, 2023)—along with refugee flows, has caused food and healthcare shortages, stressing regional governments and aid providers.

Moreover, the war has triggered security concerns along Sudan's borders, including with countries that are themselves grappling with active domestic armed conflicts (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2024). Given the current domestic instability and proliferation of armed groups in countries sharing borders with Sudan, there is increasing concern about arms trafficking or smuggling into the Amhara region of Ethiopia via the Sudanese border, as reported by Ethiopian state and non-state mainstream media outlets. This could worsen the security situation in neighboring countries, as smuggled arms might fuel and spread violence by armed groups with contending interests, further complicating the situation in Sudan as well. This could lead to the potential spread of violence and combatants across borders, potentially engulfing the entire region from Somalia in the east to the westernmost point of the continent. Although Sudan used to act as a buffer between extremist militants in Somalia in the Horn of Africa and those in the Sahel region, the ongoing war could create fertile ground for the establishment of collaboration among extremist militant groups across the east-west region of the Sahel Sahara (ibid). This suggests that this situation may create favorable conditions for the spread of violent extremism in the region, especially given Sudan's history as a former exporter of religiously motivated violent conflicts. Not only could the spread of extremism and arms trafficking become a concern, but also the involvement of numerous non-state actors is a possibility. The likelihood of this happening is evident, as the Sudanese government's capacity to control and manage its borders diminishes because of the ongoing war. It is apparent that activities related to transboundary organized crime, including arms smuggling, will continue to spread unless efforts are made to restore peace and government institutions in Sudan.

Furthermore, the devastating war has affected every aspect of the Sudanese economy, including the industrial, agricultural, mining, and service sectors. It has also interrupted access to basic public services, hampered access to markets, and continued to trigger considerable scarcity of life-saving goods and services (Guo *et al*, 2023). The more the conflict escalates and continues unabated, the more it impacts the country's economy and people's livelihoods. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has predicted that Sudan's economy lost about \$15 billion up to the end of 2023 because of the war,

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which is equivalent to 48% of Sudan's GDP. This led to declines in output from the industrial, agricultural, and service sectors estimated to be 70%, 49%, and 21%, respectively, with an estimated loss of 5.2 million jobs at the end of the last fiscal year, equivalent to half of the country's labor force (Siddig *et al*, 2023). The poverty rate has increased to 65.6%, which is equivalent to 28.4 million people by the end of 2023, compared to 61.1% in 2019, which was equivalent to 26.4 million people (Siddig *et al*, 2023). The economy is expected to continue shrinking in 2024 since the war has continued to intensify unabated. Experts at The Soufan Center (2024), a New York-based non-profit research body, have warned that the active conflict risks spilling over into neighboring countries, with a considerable possibility of growing into a wider regional conflict.

The greater Horn of Africa has been subject to the interplay of the preferences and goals of external interests and local forces, including China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the United States. Sudan is one of the few countries in the Horn of Africa region that has vast arable land for large-scale agriculture, with easy access to the seaport of Port Sudan. It is an investment attraction for states in the Persian Gulf region because of Sudan's immediate eastern neighborhood. As a result, the conflict in Sudan has played into this competition for influence and access to Sudan and the subregion. Sudan has now become an arena for a regional proxy conflict for some of the competing regional powers, in which the main enablers of the two warring factions in the country are reportedly from both neighboring and Middle Eastern countries, mainly Egypt, Iran, and the UAE (International Crisis Group, 2024). Egypt and Iran are allegedly major political backers or suppliers of arms to al-Burhan's SAF, while the UAE is considered the main political backer and supplier of weapons to Hemeti's RSF.

Moreover, Reuters (Lewis, 2024) reported that while Chad and some tribal alliances from across Sudan's western and southern neighboring countries of Libya and the Central African Republic back Hemeti's RSF, the eastern neighbor Eritrea supports al-Burhan's SAF. Ethiopia, Israel, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, and South Sudan have maintained close ties with both warring parties and, until now, have seemingly remained neutral, trying to bring both conflicting parties to terms. In addition to becoming a battleground for the proxy war of external powers from the Middle East, some neighboring countries, such as Ethiopia and Eritrea, may be dragged into Sudan's complex conflict if the violence spreads closer to their border areas. However, until now, the countries have officially maintained their neutral stance. If Ethiopia and Eritrea are dragged into Sudan's conflict for the above reasons or any other reason, the conflict in Sudan may transform into a regional war. Experts at The Soufan Center (2024), a New York-based non-profit research body, have warned that the active conflict risks spilling over into neighboring countries, with a considerable possibility of growing into a wider regional conflict.

Ethiopia's neutral stance over the conflict in Sudan stems from its intention not to escalate or exacerbate the long-standing diplomatic disputes that put the country at loggerheads with Sudan and Egypt—first over the filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, on the main tributary of the Nile River, and second, its border dispute with Sudan over the Al Fashqa triangle, which is fertile farmland. However, although Ethiopia has declared officially that it will remain neutral in the conflict in Sudan, some experts think that it is subtly allied with the UAE because of its close relations with the latter.

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## 4. REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES AND LIMITATIONS

Since the start of the war which continues to this day, there have been multiple diplomatic tracks aimed at bringing an end to the extremely destructive conflict. These efforts have mainly focused on an immediate humanitarian ceasefire but have made minimal progress.

The East African Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a sub-regional bloc representing the Greater Horn of Africa, of which Sudan is a member, has attempted to bring an end to the crisis in Sudan. IGAD, championed by both Djibouti and Kenya, has been calling for a face-to-face meeting of the warring parties in Sudan, but to no avail. About two months after the start of the war, IGAD adopted a roadmap for the resolution of the conflict in Sudan in its 14th Ordinary Session of the IGAD Assembly of Heads of State and Government on June 12, 2023, in Djibouti, where the IGAD headquarters is located. Accordingly, the roadmap nominates Djibouti, Ethiopia (initially not included and causing some diplomatic rift), Kenya, and South Sudan as members of the IGAD High-Level Delegation for the peace process in Sudan, with President Ruto of Kenya as chair of the Quartet countries. It called for immediate arrangement of a face-to-face meeting between Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, the Chairperson of the Transitional Sovereignty Council of the Republic of Sudan, and Gen. Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo (widely known as Hemeti), the securing of a commitment from the leaderships of SAF and RSF to establish a humanitarian corridor, and the initiating of an inclusive political process towards a political settlement of the conflict (IGAD, 2023).

Although General al-Burhan initially opposed President Ruto's chairmanship of IGAD's high-level delegation, because of issues related to Kenya's neutrality in the Sudan conflict and allegedly claiming Ruto had a business relationship with Dagalo (aka Hemeti), he later withdrew his opposition after visiting Kenya, and meeting President Ruto as part of his shuttle diplomacy to convince leaders of the need to hold an IGAD summit meeting to speed up the Jeddah talks process for a humanitarian ceasefire. Ethiopia (which al-Burhan initially avoided along with Kenya) was also part of his shuttle diplomacy during his visit to Nairobi. Initially, the African countries that al-Burhan visited were Egypt, Eritrea, and South Sudan, sidelining both Kenya and Ethiopia. African countries that al-Burhan has visited since the war broke out in Sudan include Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, and South Sudan.

On a request from General al-Burhan, the 41st extraordinary summit of the Horn of Africa bloc was convened on December 9, 2023, in Djibouti. General al-Burhan attended the meeting, which was his first attendance since the outbreak of the war. During the meeting, he was reportedly involved in a heated and tense discussion with some of the other leaders in attendance. The emphasis of the extraordinary summit was on specific measures to end the ongoing war. However, General al-Burhan was not comfortable with, and rejected, the final communiqué of the extraordinary meeting, on the basis that the contents of the issued document misrepresented the outcome of the summit. In contrast, Dagalo accepted the summit communiqué and expressed his willingness to meet al-Burhan anytime and place determined by IGAD. Ultimately, by the end of December 2023, these differing responses to the outcome of the IGAD summit on the part of the two warring parties led to the failure of the IGAD roadmap, in particular its plan to realize a face-to-face meeting between Dagalo and al-Burhan. Despite the stalemate between the two warring parties, which has continued into 2024, the IGAD bloc has decided to remain actively engaged in Sudan's affairs by deciding to establish an IGAD framework comprised of respected diplomatic and political interlocutors (IGAD, 2023).

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The other diplomatic effort to restore peace in Sudan is what is known as the 'Jeddah process', co-facilitated by Saudi Arabia and the United States, and aimed at securing a short-term ceasefire and humanitarian arrangements. Since the start of the war, two major rounds of talks (from May to June 2023, and from October to November 2023) have been held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Towards the conclusion of the first round, the Jeddah peace process mediated by both Saudi Arabia and the U.S. succeeded in helping broker a short ceasefire agreement between the two warring parties in Sudan, to allow humanitarian help to reach the needy civilians trapped in the violent conflict. The second round of talks in Jeddah was about ceasefire, facilitating humanitarian access, and conditions for a broader peace process. During this round of talks, IGAD, was invited to participate in the talks on behalf of the African Union. During the November 7, 2023, Jeddah process meeting, the SAF and RSF committed to make efforts to facilitate increased humanitarian assistance, and to implement confidence-building measures (Joint Statement of Commitments from Jeddah Talks Between Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Force, November 7, 2023). Despite the signing of the Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan and the Agreement on a Short-Term Ceasefire and Humanitarian Arrangements by the SAF and RSF, on May 11, 2023, and May 20, 2023, respectively, the two warring parties could not keep their promises and failed to act to silence their guns. The violent conflict has continued into 2024, heralding the overall failure of the Jeddah peace talks process, which upset parties to the crisis in Sudan, prompted IGAD to revise its approach towards handling the crisis, and led the African Union to enhance its efforts to restore peace and civilian rule in Sudan. As a follow-up to the "Jeddah Process," peace talks were jointly convened by the US and Saudi Arabia in Geneva on August 23, 2024. These talks aimed to facilitate a face-to-face meeting between the two warring leaders to sign a ceasefire and pave the way for humanitarian access. However, the discussions in Geneva ended without any visible progress due to General al Burhan's precondition that the RSF first withdraw from the territories it captured during the war. The talks are now expected to resume at an unspecified future date.

Furthermore, the Peace and Security Council of the African Union has initiated the African Union process to bring peace in Sudan by adopting the African Union Roadmap for the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan. The AU's roadmap is broader in its scope as it aims to silence the guns in Sudan by implementing an inclusive, Sudanese-owned process, which would end the fighting and put Sudan on a path to a democratic, civilian-led government (AU Peace and Security Council, Communiqué of the 1156th Meeting of the Peace and Security Council, held on May 27, 2023, on the Situation in Sudan, Reference: PSC/HoSG/COMM.1156 (2023)). The AU process called on stakeholders in Sudan and the international community to commit themselves to the implementation of the roadmap. The key elements of AU Roadmap are: "i) the establishment of a coordination mechanism to ensure all efforts by the regional and global actors are harmonized and impactful; ii) an immediate, permanent, inclusive and comprehensive cessation of hostilities; iii) effective humanitarian response; iv) protection of civilians and civil infrastructure; v) Strategic role of neighboring states and the region; and vi) resumption of a credible and inclusive political transition process, that takes into account the contributory role of all Sudanese political and social actors, as well as the signatories to the Juba Peace Agreement, towards a democratic civilian-led government" (ibid, PSC/HoSG/COMM.1156 (2023)).

In constituting the African Union's Expanded Mechanism for the Sudan Crisis, the inclusivity and transparency of the process have been important aspects. Hence, the process involves a huge number of partners, including the members of the Trilateral Mechanism AU, IGAD and UN (the Core Group under the leadership of the African Union Commission Chairperson); the quadrilateral mechanism Saudi Arabia, UAE, UK, and U.S.; the Troika



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(U.S., UK, and Norway), the League of Arab States and the European Union; the states bordering Sudan (Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Chad, and Libya), the P5 (China, France, Russia, UK, and U.S.), the A3 on the UN's Security Council (Gabon, Ghana, and Mozambique), and Djibouti and Kenya (in their capacities as Chairs of the IGAD Roadmap) (AU Peace and Security Council, Communiqué of the 1156th Meeting of the Peace and Security Council, Held on 27 May 2023, on the Situation in Sudan, Reference: PSC/HoSG/COMM.1156 (2023)).

Despite numerous peace efforts, the two belligerent groups have remained steadfast in their pursuit of victory through military means. Despite a proliferation of consultations, meetings, statements, and communiqués, a lasting ceasefire has not been brokered, hindering the efforts of humanitarian agencies to aid the needy. Consequently, the destructive conflict and suffering of millions of people have persisted into 2024. The peace initiatives have failed mainly because of the approaches used.

One reason for the failure of various diplomatic efforts can be ascribed to initiatives attempted outside of continental and sub-regional frameworks, or mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution in Africa - the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) as a long-term structural response to the peace and security challenges of the continent. It includes the African Peace and Security Council—a standing decision-making organ and component elements for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts (Articles 1 & 2 of the Protocol relating to the establishment of the Peace and Security Council). APSA is therefore the AU's framework for conflict prevention, management, and resolution.

Accordingly, although ensuring international peace and security is the primary responsibility within the context of the United Nations, the AU and regional mechanisms are expected to play a leading role in conflict prevention and resolution on the continent. As Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General, once said, *"it is necessary and desirable to provide support for regional and sub-regional initiatives in Africa. Such support is necessary because the United Nations lacks the capacity, resources, and expertise to address all problems that may arise in Africa. It is desirable because wherever possible the international community should strive to complement rather than supplant African efforts to resolve Africa's problems"* (UN Doc. A/52/871 – S/1998/318).

Accordingly, peace talks should have been initiated and conducted within the framework of the African Peace and Security Structure and led primarily by the African Union. While IGAD, as a regional bloc, is part of the architecture, in Sudan's particular case and given the diverse geopolitical concerns and interests of the bloc's members, the AU should have taken the leading role, with IGAD playing a complementary role. Moreover, non-African mediation processes and their outcomes may not align with established regional mechanisms, and their outcomes will not have a longer-term effect as they will, in one way or another, be influenced by explicit or implicit concerns and the interests of external factors that have contributed to the fragmented processes.

The other factor has to do with the ongoing crisis in Sudan, which arose from a political conflict that escalated into war. This implies that the root cause of the crisis is political. However, apart from the AU, the focus of the fragmented peace processes has been on bringing the two warring factions to the negotiating table, without due attention and consideration of stakeholders in the political process in Sudan. A temporary ceasefire can be brokered but may not be sustained because political stakeholders in Sudan will not own and support its implementation. This is simply because they have not been part of the process. The extent of inclusiveness of the peace process matters greatly for the effective

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implementation of a possible peace deal in Sudan.

Furthermore, some of the peace initiative processes that have been attempted are vulnerable to external interference, either directly or by proxy. Examples include the Jeddah process and the IGAD track. Sudan has a strategic location along the Red Sea, an important maritime trade route connecting Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, and moreover, is also located at the center of the hydro politics of the Nile River, with huge water resources flowing through its territory. Sudan's vast potential for food production attracts the interest and concern not only of the neighboring countries, but also from regional and international powers. Some of the facilitators of the peace processes may have conflicts of interest as enablers or detractors of either of the belligerent groups. Hence, the probability that stakeholders in some of the peace processes would like to see a peace deal that favors their interests is high but may be detrimental to the people of Sudan and may contribute to further conflict.

## **5. IMPLICATIONS FOR SECURITY AND STABILITY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA AND BEYOND**

The Sudan war has created a crisis of previously unseen magnitude, which is causing the nation to drift to the verge of disintegration. In addition to the stalemate in Sudan's political transition process, and the devastating effect on tens of millions of Sudanese people, the war is dragging the country towards disaster and there is a question of effective survival of the state.

The war in Sudan also has an immense significance for peace and security in the Horn of Africa and beyond, because Sudan lies at the geostrategic cross-roads of the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East, bordering the Red Sea. It also shares borders with many countries, including the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya, and South Sudan. The war threatens transboundary spillover effects across the region. Exerting every effort to stop the conflict-driven catastrophe and restore peace in Sudan is in the best interests of not only Sudan, but also of the Horn of Africa region and beyond, for the following reasons:

- an increased number of people will be displaced and will cross borders seeking protection, a situation which put an immense pressure on host countries' limited capabilities to provide protection and critical life-saving assistance, including water, food, shelter, health, and core relief items. Many of the neighboring countries were already hosting large refugee populations before the start of the war in Sudan. This situation can ultimately destabilize the already fragile region.
- according to the U.S. Intelligence Community Threat Assessment (2024), the more the conflict in Sudan remains unabated, the greater the risks of the conflict spreading beyond Sudan's borders, leading to regional instability, especially coupled with the internal situation in Ethiopia (Sudan's eastern neighbor), which is currently undergoing multiple, simultaneous, and internal conflicts, and heightening ethnic tensions (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2024).
- Sudan is where the two tributaries of the Nile River—the White Nile and the Blue Nile—meet to form the proper Nile River before it crosses the Sudanese-Egyptian border. Sudan is important in terms of the hydro-politics of the Nile. The instability of the country is a major obstacle to a peaceful resolution of the current diplomatic stalemate

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among Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, being built across the Blue Nile, with longer-term implications for regional and international peace and security.

- Sudan is also located along the Red Sea, one of the major maritime trade routes of the world, connecting Africa, Asia, and Europe. The continued violence in Sudan may obstruct this important maritime passage and disrupt the movement of goods between Europe and Asia, and specifically the global maritime oil trade, endangering global energy security.
- a continued conflict in Sudan means the export of crude oil from South Sudan, conducted through the Greater Nile Oil Pipeline installed across Sudan to Port Sudan, will be disrupted or remain uncertain, affecting the economy of South Sudan, and energy supply of importing countries, including Italy, China, and Malaysia.
- the instability of Sudan makes it a fertile ground for jihadist groups in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel (such as al-Shabab in Somalia and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) to establish networks and coordinate their operations across porous borders. Given Sudan's history in the 1990s of hosting and giving sanctuary to Osama Bin Laden, the founder of Al-Qaeda, coupled with its important geographical location and weak border management and surveillance, the conflict in Sudan will undermine the efforts that have been made by regional and international actors to address the perilous activities of jihadist militants in the above-mentioned geopolitical sub-regions.
- increased cross-border movement and diminished border control because of the conflict in Sudan, will create favorable conditions for the spread of organized transboundary crime, including smuggling of small arms and light weapons, drug smuggling, human trafficking, and money laundering, which may have a spillover effect across the Horn of Africa and the Sahel-Saharan regions.
- the conflict in Sudan could turn into a proxy war given the competition and rivalry between international and regional powers for influence and access in the Horn of Africa region. Some of the external actors may become involved and support either of the two warring sides in the Sudan conflict, which would potentially complicate peacemaking in the country.

The prospects for peace and security in Sudan and its impact on the Horn region depend on whether the African Union, within the framework of its conflict prevention and resolution mechanism, can effectively spearhead and consolidate the stalled peace initiatives into an all-inclusive AU process, in collaboration with international (such as UN) and sub-regional (such as IGAD) partners, and Sudan's multilateral and bilateral stakeholders. To what extent the people of Sudan own the process and play a leading role in solving their problem also depends on the enabling environment that would be created by the African Union. From the perspective of trust, the parties to the Sudan conflict will be more comfortable with a process under the auspices of the African Union rather than IGAD, in which sub-regional geopolitical rivalries and animosities are evident. If the multiple peace processes are to continue, the possibility of achieving peaceful resolution to the conflict in Sudan remains bleak.

On the other hand, because of the influence of numerous geopolitically significant factors, the Horn of Africa has increasingly become a stage for international and regional competition and rivalry over strategic interests and concerns. This trend has fostered rivalry and strained relations among international and regional powers, gradually turning the

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region into one of the world's most militarized areas, with the potential for diplomatic and military confrontations, directly or by proxy, undermining any peace initiative implemented by the African Union or UN. In the context of Sudan, there might be the possibility that some external powers provide supplies to the two belligerent groups, or any other potential would-be party to the conflict, which will potentially complicate any future peace process in the country.

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