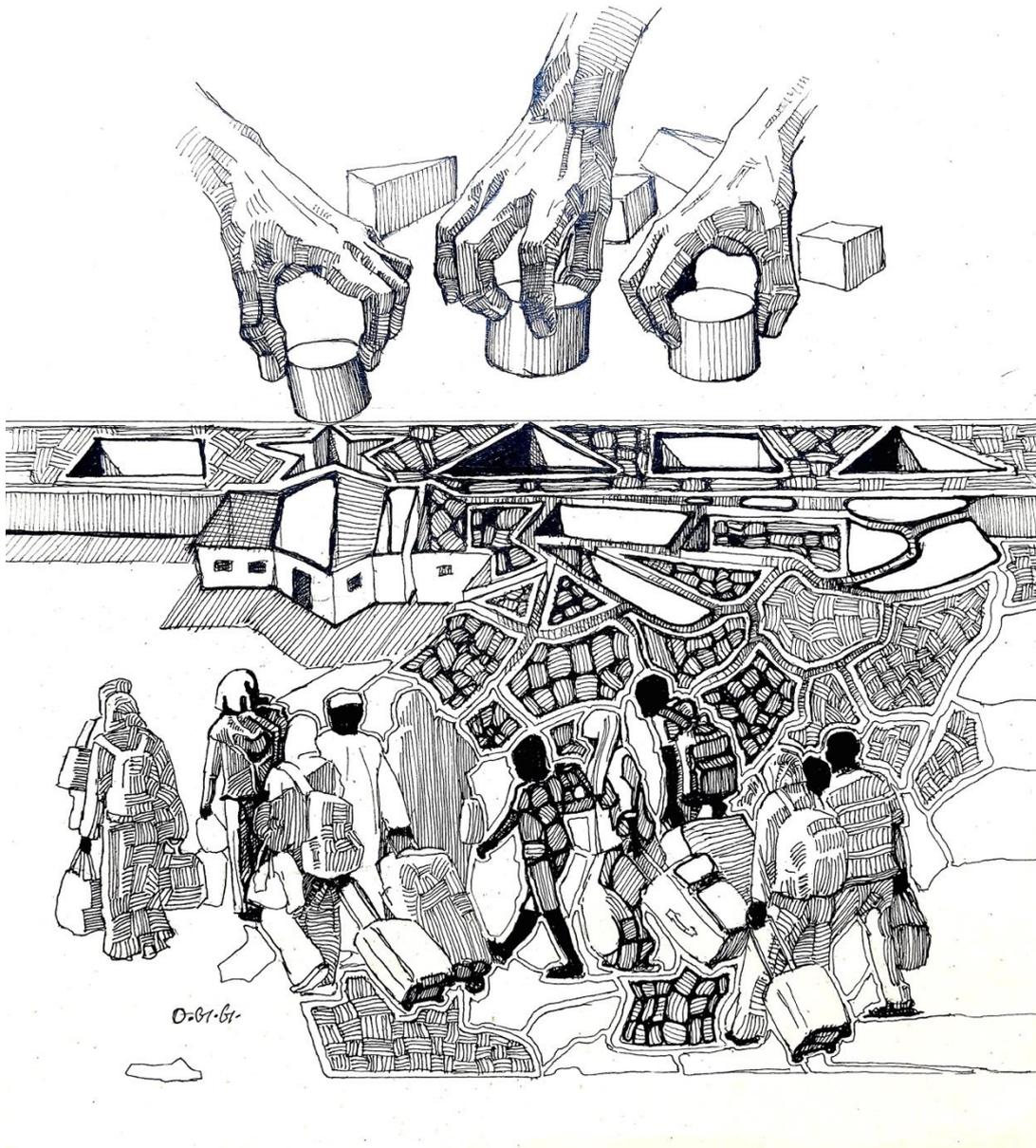


Competition among Sudan's Mediators: The Prospects for Peace Hang in the Balance



By Elwathig Kameir

While the Sudanese people continue to suffer the consequences of a bloody war which is destroying everything in our country, a variety of platforms, mediators and heads of state are competing to lead the negotiation process to promote solutions that will benefit them politically. In this article, I discuss this competition, its themes and agendas, and lay out how it has contributed to the failure of any to achieve tangible progress towards stopping the war or addressing its root causes.

Less than a month following the outbreak of the April War, a joint Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United States of America (US) succeeded in bringing together delegations representing the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Jeddah to negotiate an end to the war. On May 11, 2023, the two parties agreed to a declaration of principles and specific commitments governing the negotiation process. The declaration set the negotiation agenda as protecting civilians and reaching a short-term ceasefire to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid and the restoration of basic services, with a commitment to scheduling subsequent expanded discussions to achieve a permanent cessation of hostilities. Perhaps most importantly, the declaration stipulates in its second clause **that commitment to the declaration would not be linked to engagement in any political process.**

However, the negotiations faltered and did not achieve any of these goals, leading the KSA and the US to suspend negotiations between the two parties to the conflict in Sudan, for four months, between June and October. When talks resumed, representatives of the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) joined. Less than two weeks later, on November 7, the two parties signed commitments to deliver humanitarian aid, confidence-building measures, and a ceasefire, in preparation for a permanent cessation of hostilities. However, this second round of talks also failed to stop the war, leading to an indefinite suspension in December.

IGAD's Intrusion and the Competition among Platforms

In my opinion, the collapse of the Jeddah talks, and IGAD taking over, is mainly due to a combination of several intertwined and closely related factors, most notably the insertion of political issues onto the negotiation agenda. Although at the start of the second round of negotiations, the mediation urged the two sides to “resume what was agreed upon in the Jeddah Declaration”, and stressed that the talks would “not address issues of a political nature” (Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release, October 29, 2023), requested confidence-building measures included a SAF's commitment to detain those who escaped from prisons (i.e. the leaders of the National Congress Party), and take measures against those provoking escalation. These were demands of a political nature and not consistent with the agenda of the Jeddah Declaration. Another factor was the participation of IGAD and the AU in this round of talks, with the IGAD yearning to exploit the circumstances in order to take over the negotiation process. Despite the SAF's rejection of the AU and IGAD roadmap in late May 2023 criticism of Kenya's chairmanship of the IGAD Quartet leading the IGAD initiative, and the threat to withdraw from the organization, IGAD's has continued to insist on its prime sponsorship of the negotiations.

In November 2023, the winds blew as the IGAD ships desired, as the Chairman of the Sudanese Sovereignty Council, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, visited Nairobi and met with the Kenyan President, William Ruto, and Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, in Addis Ababa, seeming to overcome the Sudanese government's rejection of IGAD and the Quartet on the grounds that the Kenyan president was biased in favor of the leader of the RSF militia. He then traveled to Djibouti, where he presented request to hold an emergency summit on Sudan to the Executive Secretary of IGAD.

It was as if IGAD was counting the seconds to take control of the issue of war and peace in Sudan. As soon as the KSA-USA mediation announced the suspension of Jeddah, on December 4, 2023, IGAD called for an extraordinary summit in Djibouti on December 9. In what appears to be an attempt to bypass the Jeddah platform, the summit agreed that IGAD and the AU would share the mediation, with IGAD carrying out the mission of: stopping the war, including the delivery of humanitarian aid and realizing a permanent cessation of hostilities, which is the main agenda of the Jeddah platform, while the political process would be entrusted to The African Union and the "Extended Mechanism for Resolving the Crisis in Sudan" which was established at the ministerial session on Sudan on April 20, 2023. The extraordinary summit's call for a face-to-face meeting between the SAF and RSF leaders aimed to create a political process in which the RSF and political forces, represented by the Coordination of Democratic Civil Forces, "Taqadum," could participate. When IGAD failed to arrange the meeting, this was the straw that broke the camel's back, leading to tension between IGAD and the government of Sudan. The GoS refused to participate in the Entebbe extraordinary summit on January 18, 2024, and subsequently froze its membership in IGAD after an invitation was sent to the RSF Commander to attend the Presidents' Summit.

It is important to note that the relationship between the AU and IGAD is governed by the rule of subsidiarity, through which sub-regional actors such IGAD should lead conflict resolution efforts. In the case of Sudan, IGAD plays a key role because of Sudan's membership in the organization. However, the African Union still has influence, even if it assumes a low profile, through focusing on Sudanese civil and political initiatives. The AU has not stopped reaching out to some political and societal figures and groups, indeed, the Chairperson of the AU Commission engaged in intensive meetings with all parties in the political, civil and societal forces and armed movements in Cairo from July to October 2023, during the suspension of the Jeddah talks. The AU did not exclude representatives of the RSF which it described in a statement as "the pillars of the regime ousted in 2019" from these consultations despite the numerous and diverse objections to the involvement of the RSF and/or the Islamists. Paradoxically, IGAD invited only a "Taqadum" delegation to meet with heads of state and government at the Entebbe summit, which reflected a noticeable conflict in the two institutions' methodology for approaching a negotiated, political solution and may challenge the credibility and perceived neutrality of the entire mediation. On January 17, the Chairperson of the AU Commission appointed a high-level mechanism of three prominent African figures to work on settling the armed conflict in Sudan, only one day after the Sudan government's decision to "stop engaging and freeze dealing with IGAD regarding the current crisis in Sudan," showing a lack of coordination. It is also ironic that the African Union Commission announced its tripartite mechanism observers were waiting for IGAD to name its Special Envoy for Sudan according to the outcomes of its December 9 summit.

The rivalry of platforms was not limited to Jeddah, IGAD, and the African Union. Influential countries in the region that are not members of IGAD, specifically Egypt and Chad, are affected by the war in Sudan in particular due to the heavy influx of refugees into their countries. This exclusion from both the negotiation platforms prompted the two countries to cooperate on another forum, which they called the “Neighboring Countries Initiative.” Cairo hosted the first summit of these countries in mid-July 2023, which was attended by all of Sudan’s neighbors, including the Central African Republic and Libya. There is no doubt that Egypt is a regional player that cannot be ignored and one of its main priorities is to reaffirm its presence. However, with the exception of the meeting of foreign ministers of neighboring countries in N’Djamena during the first week of August, the initiative failed to create an effective follow-up mechanism, and differences between Egypt, on the one hand, and Ethiopia and Chad, on the other, the initiative died in its initial stages.

Despite the Jeddah mediation’s acceptance of transferring the talks to IGAD, the KSA appears keen to restore the Jeddah Platform, as demanded by its Deputy Foreign Minister in his speech before the IGAD Summit in Entebbe. In his words, “Implementing the Jeddah Declaration and committing to protect civilians in accordance with the principles of international humanitarian law and human rights principles is the way to resolve the current crisis in brotherly Sudan. Saudi Arabia believes that the Jeddah platform and the results it has achieved have received the support of the Sudanese people and great international backing, which encouraged its resumption at ‘Jeddah 2’ with the participation of a representative of the African Union and IGAD.”

In conclusion, negotiation moved from the region to the international arena with the United Nations attempting to contribute, while knowing that it could not be able to assume a leading role in any negotiation by virtue of the principle of “subsidiarity,” which delegates the task of resolving disputes devolves to IGAD and the AU. Given the failure of the Jeddah Platform, IGAD, the AU, and the “forgotten” neighboring countries’ initiative, to stop the war, it became necessary for the personal envoy of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ramtan Lamamra, to present an alternative vision. However, he needs time to complete his consultations with all stakeholders, before making his initiative public. In the words of the Personal Envoy at the Entebbe Summit, “The Secretary-General and I are convinced that there is a need for a unified and coherent international mediation process that harnesses the resources and approaches of our organizations to help the Sudanese end this brutal war. I hope that we can discuss how this process can be used to build on existing efforts”.

Conclusion: What is the Fate of a Negotiated Solution?

The lack of a coherent regional and/or international approach to the negotiations makes the competition over platforms an obstacle to any negotiated solution to the war and achieving sustainable peace through a comprehensive foundational political process. This competition between mediation platforms is not only over the venue, but also over the agenda and ultimate objective. Jeddah defined the parties as the SAF and RSF, and specified a limited agenda focused on reaching a short-term ceasefire to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid and the necessary measures leading to a permanent cessation of hostilities, **de-linked**

from any political process. Meanwhile, IGAD designed a political negotiation process based on a face-to-face meeting between the Commander-in-Chief of the SAF and the Commander of the RSF, with the leadership of “Taqadum”, which have signed a declaration of principles with the latter, as if repeating the process of the defunct Framework Agreement.

It is true that IGAD was successful in brokering and facilitating the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM/A) in Naivasha in 2005, and the Peace Agreement for South Sudan in Khartoum in 2018. However, this success was contingent on the presence of a state with strong leverage, influence, and ability to apply pressure, whenever needed, on both sides of the conflict. This was Kenya in the CPA process, and Sudan in the case of South Sudan (with the blessings of Uganda). Currently, the countries in the region lack a united position, in light of blatant regional and international entanglements, and in the absence of a country qualified to lead the mediation, in addition to the conflicting interests of these countries, whose leaders are personally competing to lead the peace process to achieve personal political gains.

The inability of Sudanese political elites to cultivate and foster national solutions to the armed and political conflicts in Sudan has led to external, regional, and international mediation becoming common practice. If this assistance is unavoidable, then any external mediation must work to create an environment in which the Sudanese are able to develop solutions that work for them, instead of imposing solutions designed to serve their own interests.

No negotiated solution will achieve sustainable peace without designing a negotiation process based on fulfilling two interrelated goals: stopping the war and sustaining peace. Stopping the war can only be achieved through negotiations between the SAF and the RSF on military and security arrangements to form one professional, apolitical, national army under a unified command, subject to reform and modernization, together with the rest of the security sector, and accommodates the diversity. The negotiation agenda to achieve this objective includes military measures that separate between forces, cessation of hostilities, opening corridors for the delivery of humanitarian aid, and devising a roadmap and mechanisms for the process of forming a single army within a given time frame. As for ending the war and sustaining peace, it is achieved by addressing the root causes of war by jumpstarting a founding political process in which all political, societal, civil and youth forces, resistance committees, women’s organizations, armed movements, national figures and public opinion leaders participate (with the exception of corrupt and criminal individuals) in designing the process, with the ultimate objective of holding a National Constitutional Conference, to address founding the state and drafting the constitution.

In order to avoid competition between mediations, the Jeddah Platform should sponsor the negotiations on stopping the war and committing the parties to the Jeddah Declaration of Principles that govern the process, facilitated by KSA and the US, and in coordination with the AU and neighboring countries, especially Egypt, South Sudan, and Eritrea, and implementing technical measures related to security arrangements leading to the formation of one national army. The African Union should lead the political process, as originally agreed upon at the IGAD summit in Djibouti. In addition, the Chairman of the AU Commission should build on previous consultations with multiple political, civil and societal forces. The high-level tripartite mechanism, should coordinate with regional and international actors, including IGAD, the United Nations and the League of Arab States, to ensure a comprehensive

process to restore peace and stability in Sudan. The AU must also activate the “Extended Mechanism for Resolving the Crisis in Sudan,” established at the ministerial session for Sudan on April 20, 2023, which includes, in addition to the AU Commission and IGAD, a number of countries concerned with Sudanese affairs, regional and international organizations, neighboring countries, in addition to the African countries members of the Security Council.

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