

Sudan's civil war: Political polarization, complicated mediation and growing fatigue

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Introduction

As we approach the third-year anniversary of the war between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) that erupted in Khartoum on April 15, 2023, new war narratives are emerging, and the political economy of war is solidifying. Meanwhile, Sudan is the largest humanitarian disaster in this century so far. The global response, in terms of serious mediation efforts or practical solutions, beyond sympathetic rhetoric, appears to be meager, at best, and at time outright normalizing the conflict as complex and intractable. In a nutshell, there have been multiple efforts to broker a truce between the fighting parties. These efforts started with the Jeddah Declaration signed on May 11, 2023, then followed by Manamah Agreement in February 2024, then Geneva talks in August 2024 and finally the Quad Statement of September 12, 2025. On the political front, calls for coordinated efforts to bring Sudanese political actors together have culminated in the emergence of the Quintet (United Nations, African Union, League of Arab States, IGAD and European Union) to handle the political process alongside UK and Norway while the Quad is expected to focus on ceasefire.

The failure to even reach a humanitarian truce in the face of such a devastating humanitarian catastrophe stands as the epitome of the dysfunction of the international order that emerged after World War II. Such observations have been made by many in the recent past, but the Sudan example brings it into focus in a new way.

At the same time, there are three emerging realities of the conflict that are disempowering mediators. First is **the audacity of regional intervention** in the war in Sudan has risen to the extent that many now treat Sudanese, who are subjected to war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, the use of chemical weapons, and the most unthinkable types of human miseries, as objects rather than actors the crisis. The fact that the Quad Initiative, which is being brokered by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and UAE, does not even allow active participation of Sudanese actors, whether those engaged in the fighting or civilians, while major bargains are made about their country's fate, is a case in point. Second is that **political life and civic spaces** in Sudan have become **deeply and extremely polarized**. International actors continue to fail to understand the nuances of these divisions and how they impact organizing by Sudanese actors within these spaces.



Third, the **war narratives developed by belligerents and other actors**, are increasingly contributing to the **militarization** of political discourse, **militia-ization** (from militia) of political spaces and **normalization** of foreign intervention.

The interaction of these three phenomena creates a sense of helplessness among regional and international actors, which in turn contributes to the growing intellectual fatigue. This essay briefly discusses these phenomena, but each phenomenon warrants a deeper analysis.

Regional interests drive blatant foreign interference

On the eve of the third anniversary of the April 15 war in Sudan, there seems to be no end in sight. However, of the various initiatives mentioned above, the Quad Initiative appears the most likely to deliver a humanitarian truce. There are three reasons the Quad may have a better chance, even though three countries of the Quad (mainly Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, don't appear to be adhering to their own negotiated and agreed upon statement of September 12, 2025).

First, the best mediators are those with well-defined interests. Egypt's interest in ensuring that the River Nile will continue to run north at the same rate is nothing less than an existential objective. The failure to reach a negotiated formula to share the Nile's resources coupled with Ethiopia's ambition to build more dams along the lines of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) increases the importance of Sudan for Egypt's national security. The Nile aside, Sudan's fragility allows Egypt access to cheap natural resources, including livestock, minerals and possibly land, from Sudan without even entering into complicated trade deals or securing hard currency.

Given how the Egyptian economy is crumbling under heavy debt service, high unemployment rates and the decline of work opportunities in the Gulf, it appears that Sudan is the lungs through which Egypt breathes. For the Saudis, some sort of stability in Sudan is important for avoiding the growth of terrorist networks. Additionally, it has become clear that the Saudis are trying to catch up to the UAE in the game of economic diversification, and Sudan can be a place for strategic investments in food production in an increasingly unstable world. For the UAE, Sudan seems be one piece of a larger vision of economic investments across the African Sahel. Along the same lines, both Saudis and Emiratis desire a foothold in the Red Sea. The United States is a very close ally to all three countries, and the stability of these countries is a strategic objective for the US. In addition, the US is keen not to allow fertile environments for terrorist elements, like what we saw in Iraq and Syria, to flourish especially along the Red Sea, a key global trade route.

As such, one might assume that the Quad Statement of September 12, 2025, was negotiated in good faith among the four countries and that they have the diplomatic tools to iron out their conflicting interests, rather than make Sudan the space for settling these. If that is not the case, then the only hope for the world to end the largest humanitarian catastrophe is for the United States, and more specifically from President Trump directly, to play a stronger role. If the US does not act and the Quads fails, then the world must expect that the war in Sudan will be regionalized from the Sahel through Sudan into the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. Such a

result would bring the world to its knees, with hundreds of millions of refugees and room for criminal and extremist networks to flourish. While the fighting has been escalating, mainly via drone warfare, General Al Burhan gave his response to the Quad in writing on February 28 without signaling whether he is willing to negotiate or accept the Quad proposal. Therefore, the fate of the Quad appears to rest on whether the Trump Administration is going to use some inventive tools to mount pressure on both sides, but more specifically on SAF's leader and the potential spoilers, mainly the National Congress Party (NCP), Juba Peace Agreement signatories who sided with SAF and the beneficiaries of the emerging war economy behind them. In the meantime, the world should not fool itself, if the United States cannot engineer a humanitarian truce, let alone a comprehensive political arrangement that build a lasting peace, then no one can.

Polarization and ethnic division

Sudan is not new to polarization and ethnic politics, all its civil wars were largely fueled by geographic and ethnic grievances. The first civil war in August 1955 started in South Sudan and eventually led to the secession of the South in 2011 after decades of fighting. The first Darfur war in 2003 was also fueled by ethnic and geographic grievances. However, it must be noted that Al Bashir's Islamist regime is the only one that officially invested in ethnic strife as form of policy to suppress armed movements that were born out of economic and cultural marginalization. A few glimmers of hope in the 70 years since Sudan's independence were the uprisings that occurred in 1964, 1985 and 2018/19. Each time ending a civil war would be one of the major objectives of the uprising, but to no avail. Sudan has never found a formula for peace with itself. So, when the war erupted on April 15, 2023, Sudan had already experienced wars in all its peripheries except for the north.

This war erupted in the capital, Khartoum, before expanding to the entire country and left a deep impact on the Sudanese urban middle class. At this point, Sudanese are polarized largely by factors other than political ideology. These factors include social location (geography, ethnicity and class broadly defined), the perception of who might have caused harm and direct interests. As expected in a society plagued by war and fear, the priority becomes not about alignment of values, but rather safety. As such, people retreated to their elementary identities in terms of ethnicity, tribalism and conviction. The workings of these dynamics are so subtle that they may drive people unconsciously to either overtly or covertly support one of the belligerents while touting moral judgment over atrocities, which side is less evil and the role of foreign actors to justify moral compromise and avoid cognitive dissonance. This can be seen clearly in the behavior of Sudanese refugees who escaped to Europe but find themselves opposing those who seeking to end the war simply because polarization has reached the level of if "you are not with me, you are against me." This is affecting how people organize as political ideology takes a backseat to safety.

Against this backdrop, it is very strange to hear diplomats and international actors making statements such as "civilians are fragmented" in almost all spaces and discussions on how to achieve peace in Sudan. To begin with, there is obvious confusion about the definition of "civilian" as many apply the term to political forces such as Tasis who support either SAF or RSF. While both camps have civilian components, it would be a mistake to describe these as civilians. So, when one says that civilians are fragmented, are they referring to these elements?

In addition, the premise behind the need for civilian agency rests on their ability to build mass constituencies to oppose the war and delegitimize its narratives. This premise is now working like a catch 22, for every day of the war polarizes more people, not because of ideology but through the factors mentioned above. So how do you create something that the war erodes every day? That does not mean that there are not still many actors who oppose the war; as people's positions are likely to shift and change, they need to continue to be in dialogue, for the stronger they become, the more likely they are to become an alternative to armed groups. More importantly, antiwar civilians will be the seed for reunification that can bring the country together again in the face of extreme division.

The other aspect to such polarization is that it would be a mistake to think for a second that Sudanese civil society is not a victim to such divisions and polarization. Because of the long history of state failure and erosion of political capital, many political actors in Sudanese civil society now find themselves thinking about using their agency directly, which is problematic for organizing. For example, every day six or seven like-minded people come together and start an initiative and soon they realize they need to connect with other initiatives to be effective, then they realize they have to create a hierarchical structure if they want to be able to make decisions and act, but when they do, those who don't find themselves in the leadership go out and start new structures.

To outside observers without deep and intimate knowledge of the space, the proliferation of civil society entities and initiatives may create the impression that "civilians are fragmented." In fact, most of these initiatives are the same people wearing different hats in new initiatives either to increase their personal influence or to take advantage of funding opportunities in a community that is impoverished by the war. These motivations are justified and logical, but they should not be used to validate the erroneous conclusion that civilians are fragmented and thus that they cannot play a major role in stopping the war. Additionally, the programmatic approaches and methodology used by INGOs and even UN agencies to engage civilians, which tend to focus on certain groups without clearly defined representation criteria gives legitimacy to some groups while denying others. This phenomenon has been dubbed the NGO-ization of politics. One can easily argue that Sudanese political spaces are becoming an epitome of this phenomenon.

These points of analysis are the kind of nuance one finds lacking in international circles and without this nuance, there is a danger that internationals will focus on the belligerents and ignore civilians (as they are useless and fragmented), which will eventually legitimize military actors, further militarizing public spaces. However, why should one expect civil society, which is diverse by its very nature, to be monolithic and speak with one voice?

Competing war narratives normalize the war

There are three major narratives that now occupy Sudanese public spaces. Each contains partial truth. However, each narrative holder claims to be the owner of absolute truth and labels those not in agreement as traitors, laying the ground for hate speech and more polarization. These narratives evolved as war ravaged cities and towns and will continue to do so.

On one hand, the SAF's camp narrative is anchored on two major points, **one is that RSF is a tool for a foreign invasion and the second is that RSF has been planning to seize**

power. They argue that the RSF started the war to take power by force or through a coup and that people must join the fight by creating militias to defend the state against chaos. Defenders of this narrative use the well-documented heinous atrocities committed by the RSF as evidence and argue that the RSF is waging war against Sudanese people and by contrast confer legitimacy on the SAF. The main objective is to make the case that war is legitimate and the call for peace is associated with the RSF and treasonous. The blind spot in this narrative is that it completely denies structural and historic failures that plagued the Sudanese state and the role of the Islamists in destroying the transitional government.

On the other hand, Tasis has constructed a new **narrative that this war aims to dismantle the inherited colonial state and rebuild a new state based on equal citizenship, federalism, secularism and equal share of resources.** These statements in their abstraction are accepted by most Sudanese political actors, including many in the SAF camp. They justify war against the Islamists is justified as they are using all tools to obfuscate the reality of war. The weakness of this argument is the question of whether the way to achieve these objectives is through war, especially given that the failure of violence as a means for positive change. Another problem with this narrative is that it ignores the RSF's ambition to rule (govern would perhaps not be a useful term here), the impact of foreign influence, and the fact that this war is not killing National Congress Party (NCP) members (the narrative's Islamists) but rather innocent Sudanese people who marched against them in the millions. In fact, the NCP is likely to emerge out of this war with more wealth and better organization if accountability measures are not taken.

The third narrative, developed by nonaligned civilians like Somoud, **is that April 15th war is an extension of the structural failures of the state and the only solution out of such national crises is the creation of a new social contract.** These groups acknowledge that the Sudanese state has faced some serious structural failures since independence. The major manifestation of this failure is that Sudan has been at war for 58 out of 70 years since independence. These forces also accuse the NCP of controlling the security sector and of using the war to retain power after they were ousted by popular revolution in 2019. They acknowledge regional and international interventions, but argue that the origin is domestic and call for peaceful solutions that lay the foundation for a new social contract. The major blind spot for nonaligned, antiwar civilians, especially those not involved in the transitional government, is that they confuse genuine, constructive criticism about the performance of civilians during the transitional period, with the malign criticism intended to create an atmosphere of demagoguery. This dilemma, coupled with the political economy of how political actors are organizing, as discussed above, presents a serious challenge to unifying pro-democracy voices.

However, these narratives, coupled with the militarization of political space by armed actors, have become vehicles for the spread of militias, as it has become evident that the only way for people to rise to power is through guns. The behavior of both belligerents and their militias both before and after the April 15 war confirm this reality. At this point, no one knows how many militias there are, but some estimate over a hundred. There are some reports and firsthand information that suggest that the RSF is now using tribal groups as independent militias in coordinated warfare. So, the militarization of society is likely to be a long-term malaise that will remain with Sudanese for a while.

Another phenomenon is the militarization of political discourse in everyday life among everyday people. Children in schools in SAF-controlled areas are now forced to learn one narrative about the “war of dignity” (*harb alkarma*). This is not only an attempt to write a one-sided history, but also to militarize the social imagination of the next generation. It is hard to fully comprehend the impact of this phenomenon on reconciliation and future politics, but one thing appears obvious: that this war has already planted the seeds for future wars through deepening social and ethnic divides. The only way to end the cycle of war in Sudan is through a major political bargain that lays the foundation for a just peace with transitional justice and social healing.

The war narrative has also normalized foreign intervention. Some influential journalists and prominent academics openly call for Egypt to intervene directly to counter what they believe wholeheartedly is foreign invasion using the RSF as its tool. *Reuters* and other news agencies have documented Egypt and Ethiopia’s involvement in the war, while almost all actors accept that the UAE is supporting the RSF. The UK foreign minister, Yvette Cooper, said at the Munich Security conference that 12 countries are now involved in the war in Sudan. While one would expect some foreign influence in any war, it is ironic that Sudanese who criticize foreign interference don’t seem to mind at all interference from countries that back their side.

Conclusion

History, geography, socioeconomic structures and regional politics make Sudan a truly complex place to understand and fully grasping the interplay of these elements is a necessity for understanding the ongoing war. This is not an easy task. Whenever one feels they get through one layer of complexity, it is only a matter of time until they realize that there are still other layers to be uncovered. The best-case scenario at the war’s third anniversary will be to have a fragile humanitarian truce in place. Neither the SAF nor RSF are fully unified armies under one command, but rather military coalitions defined by the enmity of the other side. As such, it is very likely that even if the Quad manages to secure a humanitarian truce, it will be fragile and require strong monitoring and consequences for violations. In the meantime, polarization, expansion of militias and the changing nature of warfare will increase regional interference. The Horn of Africa is already about to explode and if that happens it will only complicate the war in Sudan even more. In fact, Sudan might become a space for reengineering regional spheres of influence. One of the worst direct results we witness today is growing intellectual fatigue as the conflict widens and becomes increasingly intractable. However, investing in resolving the conflict in Sudan is critical for Sudanese, the region and the wider global security: the sooner international actors speak with one voice and use all leverage they have, the better it is for Sudanese, the region and the world.

These observations suggest the following policy recommendations:

- Develop clear consequences for the belligerents who are reluctant to implement or derail a humanitarian truce.
- Unify the voices of international and regional organizations through coordinated diplomacy which clearly calls for an end to the conflict in Sudan and imposes consequences on those that refuse to accept a humanitarian truce without conditions.
- The United States must use every available policy tool to pressure regional backers and hold them accountable for their commitment to the Quad Statement of September

12, 2025, by ending the supply of weapons to both parties, establishing mechanisms to monitor such commitments and imposing consequences for any violations.

- Continue to elevate and support Sudanese anti-war civilian voices and enable create a viable peace narrative and alternative for Sudanese people.