



# Sudan Studies

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*Front cover photograph: Coffee Pots in a song, Sudan (Credit: Imogen Thurbon).*

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## Which Way to Peace?

Ali Abdelatif M. Hussein\*

The war between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary group it had itself established, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), broke out on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2023. In January 2024, the most difficult issue to tackle in this war is the immediate one of how to stop the conflict. That is because both forces doing the fighting have no clear path to a strategic victory. They are both trapped in a high-stakes drama with existential implications for both, as a result of a *casus belli*<sup>1</sup> engineered by remnants of the old regime out of the deadlock in talks about Security Sector Reform. After eight months of fighting, the two factions have passed up all the chances provided for an honourable settlement of the issues that ignited the conflict, including a return to the Framework Agreement of 5<sup>th</sup> December, 2022. As war grinds on, with at least 9,000 people estimated to have died and, according to the United Nations, around nine million displaced internally or fleeing the country, the public mood is darkening, with diminishing hopes of a quick peace.

The question for peacemakers is how the two belligerents can be pressed to submit to a peace process. And what kind of political process would eventually result that would persuade both generals, Abdel Fatah Abdel Rahman el Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo “Himedti”, to lay down their weapons and set aside their ambitions to gain a foothold on the rungs of power. The mechanics of the settlements proposed first, at the Jeddah talks, and second, by the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), entail the exchange of concessions and claims, of give and take. As the war progresses and destroys almost everything in its path, there is very little to fight over, and each has accumulated a rap sheet of violations of international humanitarian law, war crimes and crimes against humanity that denies them any hope of fulfilling any political ambition. Thus, a compromise, instead of being a way out for both, must seem to spell doom for both parties.

This situation also presents a consuming dilemma for the pro-democracy civilian forces, who have been consigned to the sidelines of political action, not least because as the war progressed, the state became dysfunctional, and in Khartoum particularly, non-existent, so there is nothing to mediate relations between society and those in power. In effect, civil society lost overnight its clout and influence over those in government. The army, on the other hand, has lost considerable ground and its fighting capacity for ground warfare has

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<sup>1</sup> *casus belli*: an act or situation that provokes or justifies a war

been degraded so much that it is no longer capable of capitalising on the scorched-earth tactics pursued by its air force. At the same time, the RSF is incapacitated for a different reason. Once its fighters were dislodged from their camps and billets around Khartoum by sustained airstrikes, they sought cover in the city amongst civilians – a policy that spelled strategic disaster for the RSF. The RSF was constructed as a counter-insurgency strike force and instilled with a military doctrine that regards civilians as a resource to be fleeced, and worse. As a result, it has a ‘hearts-and-minds’ problem which is impossible to overcome.

Given this backdrop, it becomes clear how complex is the task of laying out a framework for a cessation of hostilities, let alone a long-term settlement. The international community and the regional mediators have made plain that they are committed to a two-track approach: a cessation of fighting and a humanitarian operation track, brokered at the Jeddah talks, involving the belligerents; and an IGAD political process leading to a new civilian rule and transition to democracy, involving pro-democracy civilian forces. With no clear path to political power for the warring parties in any political process or a win on the battlefield, this process is likely to push the armed conflict into a deadlock.

There’s conclusive evidence that remnants of the old regime who ignited the fighting back in April have been active in steering the operational levers of the army’s war. They now seem eager to expand the conflict by reframing it as a war of dignity and independence against ‘invaders from the Sahel region fighting to dispossess Nile Valley inhabitants and take their land’. The claim simply lacks credibility, as the RSF was the product of the army’s handiwork before it acquired a will of its own and parted ways with the army leadership. In a way, they are working for an ethnic conflagration to bring about a divided Sudan, *à la* Libya. In the context of Sudan, this is a far-fetched goal because of its ethnic geography which, contrary to official narratives, tends to function as spaces of federated or confederated moral communities, born of millennia of cultural interchange and common origins, which does not translate easily into lasting ‘do-or-die’ ethnic violence. In Darfur, it took years of a state-sponsored campaign of incitement in the 1990s to bring about a genocide there.

This level of suicidal adventurism, of starting an all-out ethnic war as a cover for old-regime aspirants to regain a semblance of power, is no longer feasible and the lesson of how mutually destructive this could be is well understood by the Sudanese people after eight months of war. What is required now, and what the people are ready for, is an ambitiously assertive civilian political intervention that would set out a strategic vision for a new and different path to peace and democratic transition.

The civilian political forces have passed a landmark in overcoming the divi-

sions sown amongst them by the military factions in the government before these turned on each other. They have finally agreed a unified body, gathering all the significant pro-democracy forces led by the post-Revolution former Prime Minister, Dr Abdallah Hamdok. What is missing so far, however, is a coordinated regional and international effort to use all the leverage at their disposal to set an ultimatum and a time horizon for a negotiated peace agreement to stop the violence. However, it is well understood that for that to be nudged into being, a key piece of the jigsaw must be set in place by the civilian and political forces: namely, a well-articulated, comprehensive, clear sighted political compact for peace, state building and democratic transition. Such a move by the civilian forces will pave the way for an international, regional and national consensus on Sudan, which is urgently needed to end the suffering of the people and to provide for their peaceful and prosperous future.

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## *Sudan Studies*

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