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Sudan's Atrocious Political Transition: Resolving the Displacement and Humanitarian Crisis

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Abstract

This paper examines the increasing displacement and intensifying humanitarian crisis in the Republic of Sudan, resulting from the war between rival factions of the armed forces, namely the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). It highlights how poorly governed political transitions and centre-periphery rivalries contribute to ongoing war, death, destruction, and displacement. The data shows rapid changes in patterns of human displacement within Sudan and beyond its borders, with Khartoum and the Darfur region now being the primary origins and hosts of displacement respectively. Currently, half of Sudan's population requires aid, owing to the dire humanitarian consequences of the war.

The paper advances a dual approach – addressing urgent humanitarian needs and cessation of hostilities while pursuing long-term solutions through inclusive political transition and governance reforms to resolve protracted displacement. It argues that addressing the complex dynamics of Sudan's enduring conflicts and achieving sustainable peace require more than just immediate actions such as a ceasefire and unhindered humanitarian access. What is also needed is a comprehensive approach to tackling the political roots of these conflicts. While acknowledging the priority of a ceasefire and humanitarian access, the paper delves into the political dimensions of the conflict, and the necessity of a civilian-led transition process that is both inclusive and comprehensive, encompassing various Sudanese stakeholders. It emphasises the need for inclusive, civilian-led negotiations that go beyond the military leadership and critically examines the evolving roles of armed groups, Islamists, and former National Congress Party members, highlighting the importance of adapting negotiation strategies to new realities on the ground.

A successful resolution to the conflict requires a comprehensive political transformation and a commitment to addressing underlying issues. In addition, the paper addresses the effect of external interventions on Sudan's internal affairs particularly from the states in the Middle East and neighbourhood. It advances a transition strategy that tames external interferences, while at the same time promoting decentralized governance. This approach help dismantle the centralised power structures that have relied in the support of external actors and historically fuelled protracted war, thereby paving the way for a more decentralised, stable and accountable transitional process. Enabling a transition inclusive of all civilian stakeholders in the transition process is crucial for insulating a Sudanese peace process that could deliver a sustainable ceasefire, effectively resolving the Sudan's prolonged conflicts, halting the atrocities in Darfur and elsewhere, and addressing mass displacement within and outside Sudan.

Keywords

Displacement, Darfur, Refugees, Horn of Africa, Transition, Crisis, Humanitarian

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1. Introduction

Amid global attention on conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, a largely ignored proxy war continues in the Republic of Sudan, often veiled in misinformation and disregarded as geopolitically unimportant by the Western world. This war, similar to those in Ethiopia's regions of Tigray, Oromia, Amhara, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), has quietly claimed millions of lives and decimated the livelihoods of hundreds of millions. Moreover, it has led to the fragmentation of states, posing significant threats to international peace and security.

In their recent New York Times piece titled "The War the World Forgot," renowned experts Alex de Waal and Abdul Mohammed, known for their academic and mediation work in Sudan, unveil the untold narratives and ongoing atrocities of one of Africa's forgotten wars (de Waal and Mohammed 2023). Their article highlights the long-standing causes, the complex dynamics involving proxy actors, and the extensive consequences for civilians and the wider region. They criticize the international community's silence and its failure to support peace initiatives led by Kenya and Egypt, which aim to end the grievous conflict in Sudan. Additionally, they point out the particular failure of the USA in curbing its Middle Eastern partners' interference in this proxy war.

For many years, conflicts and political instability in Sudan have been the source of humanitarian disasters, from extreme violence and atrocities to mass displacement. The latest cataclysm was sparked by a power struggle between two military commanders: Lt Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Lt Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Fighting between them began on 15 April 2023. With support from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Ethiopia, the RSF, an increasingly aggressive force advancing with blitzkrieg speed, is almost in complete control of Khartoum, possibly ousting the SAF. The SAF, supported by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, is actively countering the RSF's push to take over the capital. If Khartoum comes under RSF control, it could lead to some African states in the region recognizing the RSF as a legitimate government, thereby rendering Sudan a proxy battleground for Middle Eastern and Horn of African powers. The potential trajectories for Sudan are showing alarming similarities to those of Libya, Yemen, and Somalia during the early 1990s (Ali 2023). In these cases, the interference of Gulf states and other external powers in internal conflicts significantly undermined state integrity. This involvement led to the fragmentation of these countries into numerous autonomous regions, some of which like Somaliland, and South Yemen declared independence, further destabilizing the countries.

As of November 2023, the war had killed thousands and displaced over 6.4 million people (UNHCR, 2023a). The UNHCR anticipates that more than 1.8 million people will flee to five neighbouring countries by the end of 2023. In addition, 24.7 million people – more than half of Sudan's population – are in dire need of aid. The desperate humanitarian consequences are evident, with those uprooted confronting hazards to their personal safety, daily needs, and fundamental rights. It is therefore crucial to address the appalling humanitarian situation and pursue solutions to the political problems that underlie Sudan's perpetual, mutually reinforcing crises.

The recurring conflicts in Sudan are rooted in serious problems in national governance; a shift in centre-periphery tensions; changing geopolitical dynamics, particularly from Gulf countries; and the failure of the pan-African and international peace and security architecture. The current crisis is only another chapter in a long history of mismanaged political transitions and power struggles since Sudan's independence from Britain in 1956.

The ongoing war in Sudan is deeply connected to the historical legacy of European colonialism. Colonial powers, in their quest for control, indiscriminately amalgamated discrete communities – each boasting unique cultural identities, institutions, and societal norms – into monolithic nation-states that mirrored Eurocentric, autocratic paradigms with centralized and monopolized war-making powers. Britain, Sudan's former European colonial master, viewed the territory as a singular entity but deliberately skewed access to essential services, economic opportunities, and political clout, invariably favouring specific groups around the capital Khartoum. This created a rift between the empowered central faction and marginalized outlying regions, with colonial subjugation merely maintained a facade of unity. As in other colonized territories, after gaining independence the groups that had taken control of state apparatuses gained even more resources, further side-lining the already marginalized. Such profound discrepancies between the core and the periphery incited tensions, sparking intermittent and escalating conflicts as factions vied for dominion and resources. Often, state entities found themselves overpowered by insurgent forces but lacked the ability to reassert effective control. Conversely, many insurgent groups, despite their resistance, could not unseat centralized powers or

usher in true democratic regimes.

Resolving the present problems in Sudan requires an immediate ceasefire, unobstructed humanitarian access, and the provision of aid and protection for those in need; however, in the longer term, any solution hinges on addressing the political roots of the crisis. As in many African countries, decades of humanitarian crises and displacement arising from war and disaster have been a harsh and enduring reality for Sudan. To break this cycle and resolve the current turmoil the country must set itself on a path toward a broad-based, civilian-led political transition that is representative of all Sudanese.

2. Protracted and New Displacement

Internal Displacement

Out of the 6.4 million displaced individuals, 5 million are internally displaced persons (IDPs), with the remainder being refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, and self-relocated refugees within Sudan, with 50% of them children and 51% female (UNHCR, 2023a). Only 3.2% of the IDPs are non-Sudanese nationals (IOM 2023). Prior to the recent conflict, certain areas in Sudan, especially Khartoum, were known for hosting substantial numbers of IDP and refugees. That situation has now been reversed: Khartoum, as the epicentre of the recent fighting, has become the primary place of origin for most IDP, refugees, and returnees. The city has produced 68% of new IDPs, followed by the Darfur region (31%) and North Kordofan (1%) (IOM 2023). With an estimated 3.8 million IDPs before the April 2023 conflict, the total number of IDPs has risen from to over 8.8 million (UNHCR,2023a). In the past, roughly 83% of all IDPs in Sudan were in the Darfur region, which is still both the source of and host to most new and existing IDPs collectively (ACAPS,2022); an overwhelming 71% (3.7 million) of Sudan’s total IDPs remain there (IOM 2023). In a region beleaguered by conflict since a genocidal war in 2003, this new round of fighting is set to wipe out what human vestiges remained.

The crisis has affected all but one of Sudan’s 18 states. The highest displacement figures have been reported in South Darfur (12.35%), River Nile (11.89%), East Darfur (11.05%), and Northern states (13.34%) (IOM 2023). Affected cities include Khartoum, Al Fasher, Merowe, Nyala, Ag Geneina, Zalingei, and



Figure 2. Author, IDPs in Sudan by Shelter (Data from IOM, 2023).

El Obeid. Six states – Khartoum, West Darfur, South Darfur, North Darfur, Central Darfur, and North Kordofan – account for the majority of IDPs. Most (68%) of the new IDPs have been displaced from Khartoum, followed by South Darfur (17%), North Darfur (8%), Central Darfur (4%), West Darfur (4%), and North Kordofan (1%) (IOM 2023).

Some 92% of Sudan’s new IDPs have taken refuge in 10 states: West Darfur, White Nile, Northern, River Nile, Sennar, Central Darfur, South Darfur, Al Jazirah, Al Qadarif, and North Darfur. The leading states hosting non-Sudanese IDPs are White Nile (90,901), Gedaref (7,535), Red Sea (15,219) and Kasala.

Over 83 Percent of the total number of IDPs from Khartoum are hosted in seven states, namely: River Nile hosts the highest number of all IDPs originating from Khartoum at 18%. More IDPs from Khartoum are hosted in White Nile (13%), Aj Jazeera (12%), Northern (11%), East Darfur (11%), Sennar (10%), and Gedaref at 8%.

Foreign nationals affected by the war in Sudan constitute about 10.7% of IDPs, refugees, and returnees (UNHCR, 2023a). These refugees escaped persecution in Eritrea or wars in Ethiopia and South Sudan, the latter being a newer nation that formally broke away from its northern neighbour in 2011 after one of Africa’s longest and bloodiest civil wars. These refugees are now caught up in the deteriorating humanitarian situation. While a total of 195,095 have self-relocated, including Tigrayans and those from Eritrea and other neighbouring countries, all are struggling to find food (UNHCR,2023a). This is forcing them to decide whether to stay in Sudan or risk returning to their homeland.

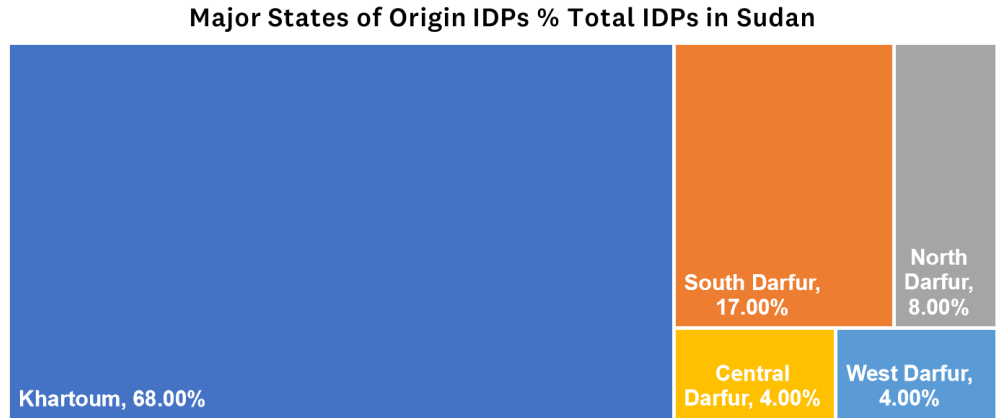


Figure 2. Author, Major States of Origin of IDPs of Total IDPs in Sudan (Data from IOM, 2023).

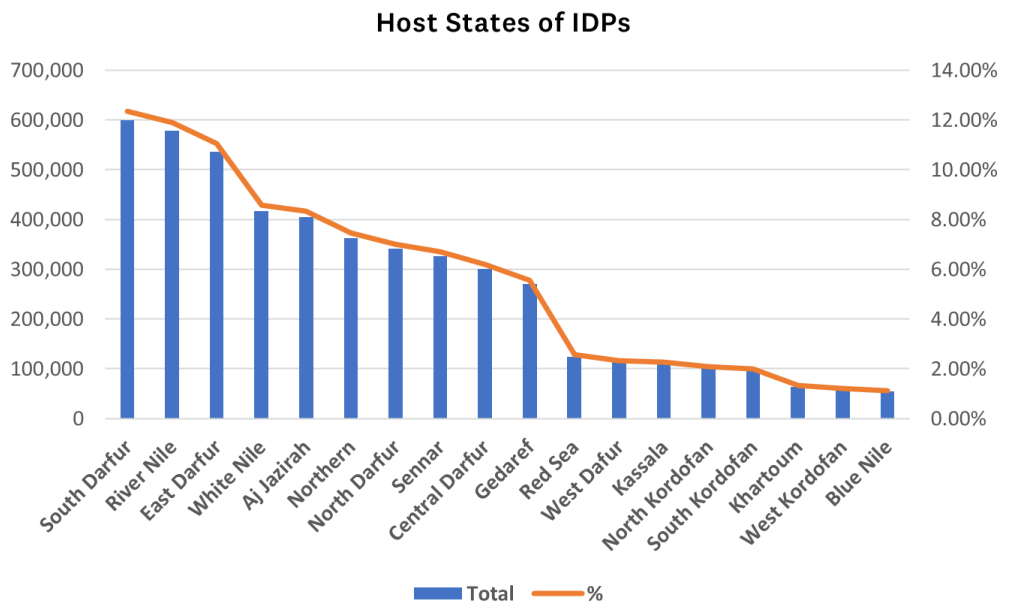


Figure 3. Author, Host state by % total IDPs, (Data from IOM, 2023).

External displacement

The war in Sudan has forced over 1.2 million refugees to seek protection in, or transit through, neighbouring countries (UNHCR,2023a). Most of them (52%) have sought refuge in Chad while Egypt is the second most common destination, hosting 39% of the displaced. Ethiopia and South Sudan have received 4.6% and 2.7%, respectively, while less than 2% have gone to the Central African Republic (CAR) and Libya. A reported 314,487 South Sudanese nationals have returned home (UNHCR,2023a). It is worth noting that around 60% of these border crossings are made by Sudanese nationals while 40% are foreign nationals and returnees, including South Sudanese, Nigerians, Ethiopians, and refugees of other nationalities who had previously fled their countries and were being hosted in Sudan.

Most of the people displaced to Egypt and Chad are Sudanese nationals, whereas the displaced population in South Sudan and Ethiopia is made up largely of foreign nationals, notably South Sudanese and Ethiopians. These movements underline the broader regional implications of the conflict in Sudan.

While the immediate humanitarian crisis within Sudan’s borders is certainly dire, the war and its associated violence have generated serious instability and humanitarian needs in the wider region. This places additional pressure on the resources of those countries, many of which are already struggling to cope with their own heavy burdens.

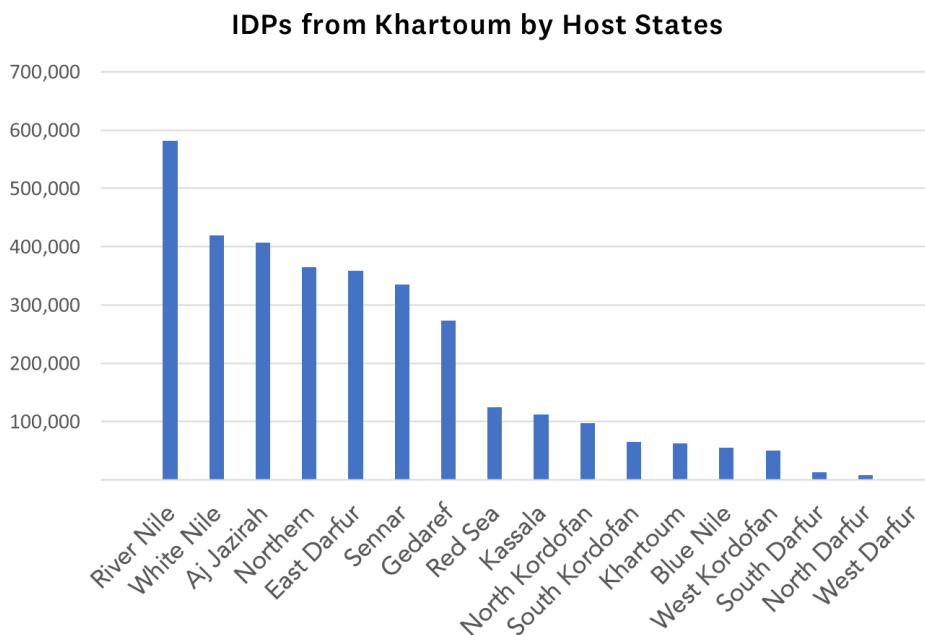


Figure 4. Author, Host States of IDPs from Khartoum (Data from IOM, 2023).

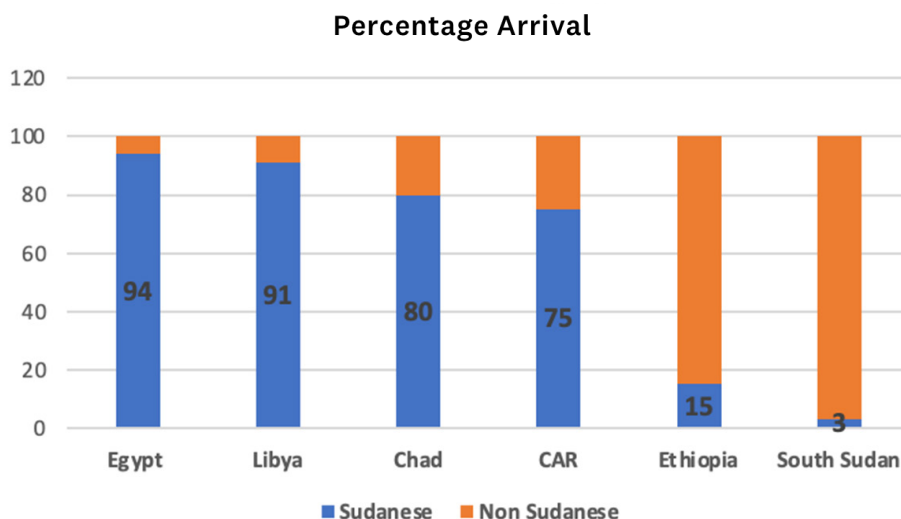


Figure 5. Author, Percentage arrival, (Data from IOM, 2023).

3. Patterns and Dynamics of Displacement

The displacement situation in Sudan is characterised by complex dynamics and unique patterns. Geographic proximity, historical connections, security, established migration paths, and familial relationships mean that a considerable number of Sudanese nationals seek safety in nearby countries, such as Egypt and Chad. The availability of transport, past travel experiences, and the presence of family members and ethnic groups in these destinations can significantly influence displacement patterns. (Ironically, Sudan has itself long provided refuge to those escaping conflict, violence, and persecution in neighbouring African and Middle Eastern countries, with a significant proportion of these individuals living outside designated camps.)

Indicating a pattern of reliance on families and communities during conflict and humanitarian crises, over 66 percent of the IDPs in Sudan are hosted by families and communities. This is followed by approximately 10 percent of IDPs who find shelter in schools and public buildings. Informal settlements and rented accommodations each constitute 9 percent. Only about 6 percent are housed in formal IDP camps.

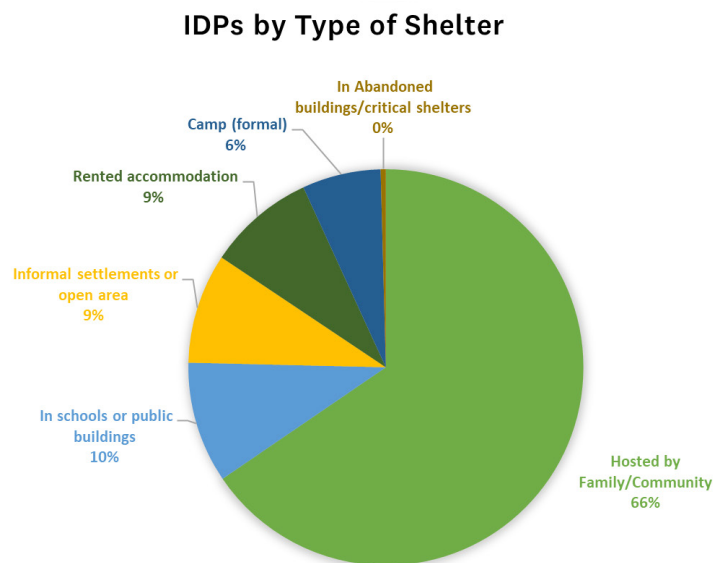


Figure 6. IDPs by Shelter Type (Data from IOM, 2023).

Sudanese states such as Darfur have a history of both producing and hosting IDPs and refugees, while violent conflicts – particularly in Darfur and Kordofan – and natural disasters have led to significant internal displacement. Noteworthy features of the latest displacements are evacuations and spontaneous returns to home countries, including returnees from Sudan (primarily South Sudanese). Several nations, including the US, UK, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Kenya, and South Africa, have facilitated the return of their own citizens through airlifts and transit through neighbouring countries, particularly Egypt.

The influx of refugees and irregular migrants has placed additional strain on these countries, most of which are already grappling with crises of their own. Fighting in Darfur has been known to spill over into Chad, and vice versa. Weapons and combatants from the coup-prone Chad and war-torn CAR all too often move freely across the region's porous borders. Similar challenges exist with Libya to the north-west. Sudan also shares a border with the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia, which has only recently emerged from a gruelling conflict involving Eritrea, an isolated, highly militarised, and unpredictable neighbour. Libya and Sudan are well-known transit routes for migration from Eritrea and Ethiopia (MSF, 2022). There are also tensions along other parts of Sudan's shared (and, in places, contested) border with the Amhara region of Ethiopia and Eritrea. To the south, Sudan shares a border with South Sudan. Many Tigrayan refugees have sought sanctuary in Sudan, fearing possible ethnic cleansing should they go back to Ethiopia. This is especially the case in camps housing Tigrayan refugees who fled the Ethiopia's war on Tigray,

in which conditions reportedly are deteriorating rapidly (Harter, 2023). Eritreans who face persecution and mandatory military service if they return to their homeland, likewise, find themselves trapped in Sudan (Wilkins, 2023). Desperate for a way out, they are vulnerable to human traffickers promising them safe passage to Europe. Many refugees have been kidnapped from camps in south-eastern Sudan managed by the UN and the Sudanese government and trafficked north towards Libya's border (Harter, 2023).

In these border regions, several of the numerous and thriving smuggling and trafficking networks are supported by local officials and armed factions (Harter, 2023). Following the wars in Sudan and Libya, state institutions have become all but absent in these areas. Hence there is limited governmental control and a consequent surge in refugees and IDPs heading towards Libya and other neighbouring countries. The EU's rapid deployment of humanitarian experts to manage border crossings between Sudan and its neighbours highlight the gravity of the matter (Valassopoulou, 2023).

These dynamics underscore the complexity of the challenges faced by Sudan and its neighbours. Unravelling the tangled displacement patterns is an essential step toward helping shape effective strategies that address the needs of displaced persons and host communities alike. It is essential to find durable solutions based on vital humanitarian support and, by necessity, international cooperation.

4. Impact and Humanitarian Needs

Sudan faces a deepening humanitarian crisis in Khartoum and West Darfur, where the RSF maintains a significant presence. The war has caused severe disruptions to daily life, including food shortages, power blackouts, communication outages, and skyrocketing inflation. As discussed, emerging data shows alarming large-scale displacement, mainly from urban to rural areas. This exacerbates the challenges faced by displaced people and places additional strain on the limited public services available in most rural areas, further contributing to conflict. The spillover of the war into neighbouring countries has further stretched the limited resources of those states.

The intensity of the difficulties faced by the refugees and IDPs underscores the profound and detrimental effects of displacement on various domains of human rights. Enforced dispersion infringes on the fundamental human rights of IDPs and refugees, including their right to life, freedom of movement and residence, livelihood, health, education, and property ownership. When viewed through a human-rights lens, the issue extends beyond mere freedom to move or stay – it also encompasses the right to choose one's residence and to protection against forced displacement and unlawful eviction.

Moreover, Darfur and other areas affected by the fighting have witnessed a spike in atrocity crimes. IDP camps in Darfur remain military targets, posing a direct threat to IDP lives and physical safety. Notably, women constitute 51% of the displaced population while children comprise 50% (UNHCR, 2023a). These people, especially the children, face specific dangers such as rape, sexual abuse, exploitation, abduction, trafficking, and recruitment to disreputable causes (UNICEF, 2023).

Countries already hosting a large refugee population, such as Chad, Egypt, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, are now facing an additional wave of asylum seekers. This places immense strain on their resources and poses a significant challenge to international humanitarian efforts. Neighbouring countries – notably Ethiopia – are also sheltering large numbers of newly displaced individuals, including their own nationals returning from Sudan, and Sudanese refugees. The situation is particularly difficult in host areas where resources are strained, owing to limited access to aid and high inflation, as seen in the Amhara region of Ethiopia, where intense fighting still occurs. With over 60 000 people arriving every month, South Sudan's infrastructure is being severely tested (Byaruhanga, 2023). Paloich Airport, normally a service point for South Sudan's oilfields, has been converted into a makeshift camp for those fleeing the conflict in Sudan. The temporary camp at the former Upper Nile University in Renk houses more than 6 000 people, many of them Eritrean refugees attempting to reach Juba, the capital (Byaruhanga, 2023). South Sudan's acting Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deng Dau Deng, has acknowledged the complexity of the situation (especially as many Eritreans do not want to return home) (Byaruhanga, 2023). Meanwhile, as the conflict in Sudan continues, the influx of people into South Sudan shows no sign of abating, indicating that the crisis requires substantial international aid and intervention. Looting, reported to be targeting UN and associated humanitarian organisations, exacerbates an already dire situation (OCHA 2023a). There are also reports of refugees from Sudan being charged fees while having to undergo cumbersome

entry and refugee determination processes (OCHA, 2023). In addition, they face smuggling, gender-based violence, and the separation of families. There have been reports of refugees in Egypt struggling to support an extended stay, with some having opted to return home.

Attacks on aid workers and facilities, as well as the diversion and looting of aid materials, have increased (Nashed, 2023). Limited access to food, water, and shelter, along with associated general health risks and outbreaks of disease in overcrowded camps, are a severe threat to survival, while the continued conflict makes the protection of vulnerable populations almost impossible. Many areas are now inaccessible to relief organisations. This situation is worsened by a curfew and state of emergency in North Kordofan, as El Obeid Town has become a transit point for RSF fighters moving between Darfur and Khartoum. Despite localised security and aid initiatives in remote locations such as Darfur, problems arising from limited resources, coupled with security concerns, hinder coordination and efficiency in aid delivery (Huon, 2021; Ahmed, 2023).

In these circumstances, it is imperative that the international community intervenes swiftly to stop atrocity crimes, provide funding, and implement effective aid strategies. Without international or regional intervention, displacement will likely persist, resulting in a protracted crisis. By providing and applying strict mediation parameters, the international community could support the political process to find a democratic transition that addresses the root causes of the conflict and displacement. The protection of human rights would help to achieve durable solutions for the displaced population.

While the immediate focus should be ceasing hostilities, providing humanitarian aid, and protecting the displaced, the long-term solution lays in a political resolution to the conflict. This necessitates a multi-pronged strategy. First, addressing the root causes of the displacement and humanitarian crises in Sudan requires stability. Second, achieving a durable solution to the massive and protracted displacement, at the very least requires an immediate ceasefire, with arrangements for the safe return of IDPs and refugees. Third, the long-term stability of Sudan hinges on political solutions that establish legitimate civilian governance representing the country's diverse population and transform the relationship between the centre and the periphery, as well as the state and the Sudanese population. A carefully planned transition, with the involvement of civilian representatives and multilateral mediation, is vital for sustainable peace and the prevention of further turmoil and displacement. Fourth, taming the interference of extra-national powers in the affairs of Sudan is more critical than ever. This is particularly important considering the ambitions of Gulf countries, which have transformed the Horn of Africa into a proxy battleground.

5. Misgoverned Political Transitions

Addressing the challenges faced by Sudan's IDPs and refugees requires a holistic approach aimed at returning them to their place of origin – or to Sudan – with safety and dignity. While the immediate humanitarian needs must be met, a major hindrance to such an initiative is the pervasive insecurity stemming directly from Sudan's long-term governance and political problems. The roots of these issues lie in a series of unstable political transitions that started with a military coup in November 1958, less than two years after independence (Cross, 2023). At that crucial moment, in a bid to avert a civil war, the democratically elected civilian Prime Minister Abdullah Khalil was compelled to surrender power to the military, under the leadership of Gen. Ibrahim Abboud (Beswick, 1991). Since then, the political situation has become progressively more complex. Abboud's autocratic rule lasted until 1964, when a mass public uprising led to his resignation and brought about a short-lived phase of civilian rule. An already precarious situation was exacerbated by the unilateral abrogation of the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, which had granted the south of Sudan regional autonomy (Beswick, 1991). Since then, general instability, military coups, and periods of authoritarian rule have dominated Sudanese politics. The last democratic election – in 1986 – brought a civilian government to power, only for it to be overthrown in 1989 by yet another military coup, this time led by Gen. Omar al-Bashir. This cycle of alternating army coups and civilian governments would continue until August 2019, when Abdalla Hamdok assumed office as prime minister after the end of Bashir's three-decade rule. In October 2021, however, after a tenure of only two years, Hamdok's civilian administration was overthrown in another military coup, led by the two generals who are now at war (Abdallah et al., 2021). These power transitions, far from facilitating peace, have instead reinforced the political gridlock.

Power dynamics between civilians and the military have undergone significant shifts over the decades, with the latest coup heightening political tensions as Burhan and Dagalo became locked in a battle for power and control. In 2019 the two were

respectively appointed chairperson and deputy chairperson in Hamdok's civilian-led interim government tasked with managing the transition to democratic elections (Copnall, 2023). The duo ousted Hamdok in October 2021 after months of strained relations between the civilian and military sides of the transitional government (Magdy, 2021). Subsequently, they themselves fell out, leading to the current conflict. It is one that has potentially far-reaching implications for the integrity of the Sudanese state, its future political landscape, and its relationships with external forces.

6. Centre–Periphery Relations

A power imbalance between the central and peripheral regions of Sudan has also contributed to the ongoing conflict. The Darfur region and other peripheral areas are often overlooked in favour of Khartoum, leading to lingering tensions and grievances. While Khartoum is the primary site of the most recent conflict, peripheral regions and border areas such as Darfur have been principal theatres of war and have borne the brunt of displacement (El-Affendi, 2023). Moreover, the protracted refugee situation in neighbouring Chad could ignite new conflicts or worsen existing ones. Conflict in the Darfur region often spills over into Chad, and vice versa, bringing with it regional security implications (Barlett, 2023). The risks associated with conflict and displacement in Darfur are greatly heightened by its geographical proximity to N'Djamena, the capital of Chad. The latest events have heightened tensions in the area bordering on Chad. The recent visit by Chad's President Gen. Mahamat Idriss Deby to the Chad-Sudan border underlines the gravity of the situation – should Chadian rebels succeed in setting up a stronghold in Darfur, for example, it would be a direct threat to Chad's government and regional security.

7. Regional and Extra-Regional Influences

This centre–periphery problem in Sudan is exacerbated by regional and extra-regional powers' relentless pursuit of their own interests, which contributes significantly to the pervasive instability. Given Sudan's geographical position, bridging the volatile and geopolitically crucial regions of the Horn of Africa, North Africa, Sahel, and the Middle East, it is vulnerable to regional and extra-regional influences. It borders seven countries (Chad, South Sudan, Eritrea, Egypt, Ethiopia, the CAR, and Libya), each of which is dealing with its own security challenges that, in turn, aggravate Sudan's instability. Sudan's neighbours, having seen significant turmoil of their own, are adding fuel to the fire, as discussed earlier.

Sudan's affairs directly impact its seven neighbours, which have themselves been grappling with intense constitutional crises arising from poorly managed transitions (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2023). Furthermore, Sudan's position on the Nile is of existential importance to both downstream Egypt and upstream Ethiopia, especially since the start of the latter's Grand Renaissance Dam hydroelectric project, which affects the river's flow. The unstable situation in Sudan, including the ongoing human displacement, has significant repercussions for these countries. Additionally, civil wars and massive human displacement throughout the Horn of Africa have brought about widespread regional instability that extends into the Gulf and Middle East (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2023).

The involvement of Libya's Gen. Khalifa Haftar, backed by Russia's paramilitary Wagner Group, and the UAE, and with support from the Chadian rebel group Front for Change and Concord (FACT), on behalf of the RSF, further complicates the situation. Weapons and combatants from coup-prone Chad and the war-torn CAR frequently cross the region's porous borders. Similar factors are at play in Libya to Sudan's north-west. The influence and interests of the Wagner Group have already increased the risk of alliances that pose a significant threat not only to Chad but also to neighbouring Sahelian countries. Foreign powers such as Russia, Turkey, and some Gulf states have also shown an interest in establishing military bases in Sudan.

Sudan has become an arena for Middle Eastern and global strategic competition, with the Middle Eastern powers – led by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey – along with global players, notably Western powers, led by the US, in opposition to Russia and China. In the current conflict, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Eritrea, and Turkey are reportedly backing the SAF, in opposition to Russia, the UAE, Chad, Central African Republic, Uganda and Ethiopia's alleged support for the RSF (Eltahir 2023). The current fighting in Sudan is thus intertwined with power struggles, identity conflicts, and resource contention at every political level, whether local, regional, national, or international.

8. Imperative of a Ceasefire

The obstacles to humanitarian access and the increase in displacement in Sudan are rooted in the persistent warfare and general insecurity. An immediate cessation of hostilities is necessary to ensure that aid reaches vulnerable populations. A recent truce negotiated in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, offered temporary relief from the fighting (Aljazeera, 2023). Such accords, however, are often violated and short-lived, as this one was. Therefore, it is crucial that the continuing talks prioritise an immediate and verifiable ceasefire that ensures aid distribution to those in need. To begin with, all Sudanese stakeholders, especially the warring parties, must acknowledge the realities on the ground. The SAF, representing the central government forces, has proven incapable of defeating the RSF and establishing control over Khartoum and other parts of the country. Conversely, the RSF lacks the power to overthrow the SAF and form a government with widespread public support. This situation has culminated in a delicate military stalemate.

The international community, for its part, should recognize that parallel mediation processes will not yield lasting outcomes. Such fragmentation merely divides diplomatic leverage and resources – resources that are notably scarce these days. Combining the three ongoing peace initiatives into a single, unified process is of utmost importance. The countries and institutions involved in these talks should present a united front regarding the desired outcome of the process.

It is essential that the Sudanese civilian forces appreciate that this mediation process is not merely about maintaining the revolution's aspirations or determining the destiny of the two generals in play. The stakes have escalated – it's now about safeguarding the integrity of the Sudanese state and the human security of its diverse population. With many young people drawn into the conflict, ending the war becomes a matter not just of national security but also of personal safety, sustainable livelihoods, and the formation of a new, secular, integrated, professional, and civilian-controlled Sudanese armed force that operates without the influence of any Islamist or foreign powers.

A transition in Sudan is likely to require boots on the ground, but only after a ceasefire agreement is reached between the warring parties and a framework for political-security discussions involving all key stakeholders is established. In essence, there is no straightforward solution. A pragmatic approach is vital to navigate towards a resolution.

9. Humanitarian Access

To alleviate the suffering of the displaced, the international community needs to extend diplomatic and financial support to Sudan's neighbours. This support should mainly entail the provision of humanitarian aid, the fast processing of asylum requests, and the resettling of refugees in third countries. Neighbouring countries should expedite and abolish entry requirements for refugees from Sudan (including visa fees). Effective provision of humanitarian aid requires external powers, donor countries in particular, to provide direct support for locally led initiatives in Sudan such as neighbourhood resistance committees and other civilian formations (El-Battahani, 2021). In this way the international community can ensure credible popular support for localised peace initiatives and promote effective humanitarian efforts at grassroots level.

10. The Primacy of Politics and its Limits

Though there is a limit to the agency of fragmented domestic politics facing powerful external powers, the paramount importance of politics in the process cannot be exaggerated: resolving the humanitarian crisis depends on effectively navigating the turbulent political transition. Once the violence ceases and humanitarian access is ensured, the focus can shift back to the crux of Sudan's crisis – its political issues. The principal causes of the continuing conflict lie in the mismanagement of political transitions, a failure to accommodate diverse identities, poor resource allocation, and an uncertain balance of power between central and peripheral structures. An accurate reading of socio-political dynamics, a balanced distribution of resources and centre-periphery political and economic power, and the just representation of diverse identities in the national power structure are essential milestones in the journey to an equitable political dispensation.

Such an endeavour will require leadership capable of halting aggression, forging the peaceful resolution of disagreements, and

formulating an inclusive transitional civilian authority. It is evident from recent developments (not to speak of a troubled history) that political transitions in the Horn of Africa can lead to brutal wars, mass atrocities, protracted displacement, and enormous destruction of infrastructure (McLure, 2009). It follows that such transitions must be planned and executed with great care if they are not to cause yet further social unrest and war. The continuation of conflicts in the Horn underscores the fact that political stability can be achieved only within constitutional democracy (Brookings Institute, 2022). Compromising constitutional democracy and accountability in the cause of regional stability seldom yields sustained peace.

11. Empowering Civilian Forces: Key to Resolving Sudan's Political Crisis

Once there is a verifiable ceasefire and humanitarian aid agencies have gained the necessary access, a mediation process on a transition mechanism should urgently be pursued. Such a process must involve all those with state-sanctioned leverage over the commanders of SAF and RSF, including the UN Security Council and its members, the US, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, assisted where desirable by African and European leaders and international guarantors such as the UN, the AU, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Representatives of Sudanese civilian entities are critically important stakeholders; without their commitment any transition will fail. As it stands, the Jeddah peace talks represent merely an extension of an antiquated strategy that prioritizes military generals and leaders of armed groups to the exclusion of the civilian forces that should be the custodians of constitutional power (Eltayeb, 2023). This approach undermines democratic governance and civilian involvement by attempting to achieve regional stability under military rule. To address this fundamental flaw, it is necessary to take a holistic and multilateral approach that involves all interested parties. Most importantly, the voices of Sudanese civilians must be heard and respected. Genuine stability and sustainable peace can only be established through broad-based participation, inclusive dialogue, and respect for democratic principles. The international community can take steps to ensure the meaningful involvement of Sudanese stakeholders, offer mediation to reduce undue external interventions, and set up a platform for an all-inclusive process. Such an approach would empower Sudanese stakeholders and ensure that transition efforts are driven by Sudanese priorities and needs, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

12. Parallel Mediation Processes

Sudan's devastating wars necessitate comprehensive, inclusive, and civilian-led integrated negotiations, leading to a peace agreement. In addition, any future peace process in Sudan must address four interconnected political issues essential to effective mediation and transition.

First, there has been a longstanding demand for inclusiveness in both the mediation and the transition phases. Negotiations solely between military generals will not end the war in Sudan. A ceasefire, while necessary, is not sufficient, and the belief that military leadership alone can ensure stability is unrealistic. Agreements made among generals have been prone to failure, and such an approach risk perpetuating a cycle of war, resulting in more casualties and destruction. The involvement of civilian leaders and stakeholders with both popular support and effective governance skills is crucial for a meaningful and sustainable resolution. Specifically, the roles of armed groups, Islamists, and former NCP members in the transitional phase require consideration and consensus among Sudanese stakeholders. The increasing association of armed forces with Islamist groups also warrants careful deliberation.

Second, the negotiations need to account for the new realities on the ground. The war has transformed the political landscape, complicating alliances, and deepening polarization. This polarization could be mitigated through robust civilian participation. This is essential for cultivating horizontal legitimacy by aligning the shared aspirations and priorities of all Sudanese political forces and communities, thereby building the mutual trust essential to the transitional process. If the various political forces and communities can establish common ground and trust, it will bolster horizontal legitimacy, leading to greater political and legal accountability and enhancing vertical legitimacy.

Third, the failure of previous Sudanese transitions can partially be attributed to the centralization and privatization of power in the hands of a few, particularly commanders of armed groups. As a result, the Sudanese transitional process has lacked political legitimacy and accountability. Therefore, transitional power should be widely dispersed among institutions at both national and

local levels. Such dispersed power centres would not only check the abuse of power by Sudanese actors, particularly armed groups, but could also insulate the process from external interference, for example, by limiting the influence of groups seeking legitimacy from foreign entities without having domestic backing.

Fourth, the engagement of and partnership with external actors, particularly the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Chad, Kenya, and the CAR, are vital for the success of the transitional process.

Currently, there are at least three parallel and separate official mediation initiatives that are yet to be coordinated:

1. The Jeddah process, run by Saudi Arabia and the US – two countries that have high state leverage to bring warring parties together.
2. The Cairo process, which incorporates bordering countries hosting refugees, with support of the League of Arab States (of which Sudan is a member); and
3. The Addis Ababa process under the auspices of IGAD, which enjoys the symbolic support of the AU.

While each of these mediation processes is unique in its approach to and leverage with the warring parties and Sudanese stakeholders, each also reflects the diverse national interests and underlying concerns of the sponsoring states and the international community, particularly regarding the role of Islamist movements and the dynamics of the war. These interests might not always resonate with the genuine concerns and aspirations of the Sudanese populace. Additionally, the existence of multiple mediation avenues may prompt Sudanese stakeholders and warring factions to engage in mediation forum shopping, choosing the platform most aligned with their specific goals or agendas and so delaying a resolution to the conflict and a ceasefire agreement.

During the December 9, 2023, IGAD Extraordinary Summit, clarified the approach of IGAD and AU in leading the mediation process (IGAD 2023). The Jeddah Talks resulted in the signing of the Humanitarian Access Agreement, aimed at ensuring unimpeded humanitarian access and civilian protection. However, there have been challenges in its implementation, as the parties violated the agreement and the co-facilitators have faced difficulties in ensuring its enforcement. IGAD's acknowledgment of "modest progress" made in the Jeddah Talks raises questions about which achievements they are referring to. Unexpectedly, it also recognized the UAE for its support to the IGAD Summit. However, this communiqué was immediately met with rejection by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF).

Of more import, the IGAD Summit endorsed IGAD's role as a co-facilitator, representing the African Union (AU), in the Jeddah Talks with KSA and the USA. The IGAD Executive Secretary has also been tasked with appointing a Special Envoy to Sudan and "to convey [the] communicate to the African Union Peace and Security Council and the United Nations Security Council and seek their endorsement and support of the same". This could help in the coordination and possible merger of the mediation process currently running in parallel.

Such a comprehensive strategy is the only way to alleviate the suffering of IDPs and refugees and ensure an enduring solution to Sudan's protracted conflict. The Sudanese humanitarian crisis and displacement will end only when the political issues are resolved.

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