

# Sudan's Civil War: Mediation Challenges and the U.S. Role

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Three experts assess the conflict's effects on regional humanitarian and security issues, outlining the requirements for a durable ceasefire.

On July 26, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Yasir Zaidan, Reem Abbas, and Alex Rondos. Zaidan is a lecturer on international affairs at the National University-Sudan. Abbas is a nonresident fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. Rondos is a

*senior advisor with the Africa Center at the U.S. Institute of Peace and the former EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## Yasir Zaidan

After two months of war—essentially an attempt by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to seize power—the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) responded by launching several offensives in Khartoum. The situation has become increasingly ugly as the RSF resorts to attacking civilians with drones and the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate. Famine is looming due to harvest disruptions and limited access to fertilizers and seeds, while only a handful of international aid agencies are currently operating in Khartoum.

Mediation efforts have failed to resolve the crisis so far. For example, the Jeddah talks sponsored by the United States and Saudi Arabia temporarily halted the fighting, but the ceasefire was eventually broken, and negotiations were suspended for weeks. Moreover, lulls in the military combat have given the RSF opportunities to commandeer property and otherwise target civilians.

U.S. policy is focused on stopping the hostilities and returning to the framework plan for restarting the civilian transition, which was in progress prior to the conflict's outbreak in April. Regrettably, this plan is not achievable at the moment due to the population's sociopolitical fragmentation and the ongoing armed clashes.

Meanwhile, the threat of spillover outside Sudan has put regional stability at risk. The reported coup in Niger is one such example. These risks are exacerbated by the involvement of several other states and actors, some of whom are endangering local U.S. security interests and contributing to a rise in terrorism and human trafficking.

Going forward, Washington should support Sudan's state administration and revive the plan to facilitate a democratic transition. U.S. sanctions against the RSF and SAF have not been successful because they need to be coupled with robust diplomacy and increased engagement by responsible regional partners, whose involvement is crucial to prevent the conflict from degenerating into a proxy war between external actors.

On the ground, civil society and "resistance committees" remain active, while tribal leaders have played a significant role in preventing the situation from devolving along tribal lines. Once a ceasefire is reached, they could contribute much to the country's stabilization and reunification.

As for RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo, Sudan's gold business is key to understanding what drives him and his networks. Gold mined in Sudan is sold in Dubai and then on to Russia via a network that includes Wagner Group mercenaries, Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar, and elements in Moscow. This crucial aspect of the situation has not received enough attention, particularly from U.S. policymakers.

## Reem Abbas

Sudan's current conflict has been marked by total devastation of infrastructure and a deliberate war against civilians. Neighborhood residents are being killed, houses are being looted, and history is steadily being erased from Khartoum in one of the largest demographic displacements in contemporary history. After weeks of such campaigns, the RSF now controls various parts of the country and the capital.

The existence of two armies and two states has made it challenging for people to support the SAF, especially given its longstanding hold on power and its implication in numerous crimes. Many citizens fear that if the army wins, the country will become a dictatorship. The divide is so deep that Sudan could disintegrate. The army is now trying to prevent a complete takeover by the RSF, which boasts a large social and ethnic base and has become the country's largest employer.

As this fragmentation persists, some areas (e.g., Sudan's eastern states) may increasingly distance themselves from the idea of a single united country, opting for autonomy or federalism to protect themselves from the encroaching war. And in western Sudan, nomadic minority groups have taken up arms to protect themselves, in part because climate change and other factors have left them with no access to the Nile River or other stable water sources. This is a big reason why Hemedti's RSF has been fighting in Khartoum and establishing formal administrative functions in states like West Darfur (similar to the "dual government" situation seen in Libya). The conflict is essentially a resource war, with various groups struggling for a viable way of life, a steady supply of water, and a means of avoiding famine.

## Alex Rondos

News of the attempted coup in Niger is symptomatic of something much wider. First, the RSF pulled Sudan into the morass of conflicts that have entangled other parts of the Sahel. And now the regional crisis is posing risks to two crucial waterways: the Nile and the Red Sea. The underbelly of the Sahara is spiraling out of control and could further destabilize the continent.

Some observers talk of "ungoverned spaces" in places like Sudan, but the fact is that the bulk of this territory is governed—not by states, but by militias, warlords, and other nonstate actors. Increasing extremism and criminalization are the driving forces behind this escalating problem. And now the Sahel's growing disorder threatens to affect Egypt (since the Nile runs through Sudan), Saudi Arabia, and global commerce (given the potential risks to Red Sea security).

Meanwhile, actors inside Sudan have been positioning themselves for the day when substantive talks about the country's future can resume. If such a process is to succeed, it must involve more than just the two main belligerents. A dialogue framework must be imposed, and the sooner the better—the longer the fighting continues, the more complicated it will be to resolve.

Washington's apparent disengagement from this crisis has had a profound effect. The region lacks a conspicuous, effective response—in fact, the response has been lackadaisical. The UN has not had a significant impact, and the African Union and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have been relatively coy in their approach. There is no catalyst to bring everyone to the table—rather, the U.S. absence has diminished partners'

confidence and encouraged other actors to intervene, creating conditions for opportunism and recklessness.

It is crucial to consider who speaks for Sudan’s wider population. Political parties, unions, and resistance committees should be recognized, and neighboring countries can mediate, but someone must facilitate this process. In addition, security discussions must do more to incorporate humanitarian assistance considerations.

The United States and Saudi Arabia are the most influential states in this regard, so they should take the lead in convening neighbors and limiting spillover. The revived Jeddah process should also focus on the humanitarian angle, including logistical challenges, famine prevention, and protection for international actors that provide crucial aid services inside Sudan.

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