Preparing for Sudan's Civilian Transition Amid War

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Brief Analysis

If the transition is to succeed, the Quad and Quintet must begin now rather than later, setting a short timeframe for the initial phases and preventing armed factions from once again translating military influence into political power.

On September 22, a U.S. State Department release **(https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesman/2026/09/efforts-to-achieve-peace-in-sudan)** asserted that the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) "do not represent legitimate constitutional governance," adding that "the conduct of the leaders of both sides makes them unfit to govern the country." Yet while Washington has usefully identified who should not govern, it has not answered the harder questions: who represents Sudan, and how can a political process be established in the absence of a ceasefire?

The U.S. message intersects with regional and international calls to end the war and move toward a civilian government. Despite the difficult situation amid expanded fighting, the preparatory work for such a government can now begin: agreeing on rules for participation, building a credible civilian coalition, and designing the institutions that will manage the transitional period. Delaying these crucial processes by waiting for a ceasefire would only give the combatants and their foreign backers veto power over Sudan's political future.

The September 23 meeting **(https://sudantribune.com/article/319224)** between the Quad (the United States, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) and the Quintet (the African Union, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, Arab League, EU, and UN) presented a significant opportunity for the two umbrella groups to work together to help place Sudan in civilian hands. With help from a designated special representative and active coordination by Washington, they should now begin preparing a strategic action plan that draws on lessons from the past and establishes mechanisms from the outset to protect the civilian process.

From Military Influence to Political Power: A Pattern That Must Change

Military elements have been involved in Sudan's government since independence in 1956, with military rulers generally relying on civilian allies to consolidate their power before removing them. The latest example was the transitional government of Abdalla Hamdok and the Forces of Freedom and Change, which ruled through a power-sharing arrangement with the military from 2019 until it was overthrown by a coup in October 2021.

Anyone mediating political solutions in Sudan should understand that even after peace agreements, leaders of armed movements have repeatedly been able to gain political power without an electoral or popular mandate. The career of Darfur Governor Mini Minawi illustrates this. After leading an armed rebellion, he became a senior assistant to President Omar al-Bashir and head of the Transitional Darfur Regional Authority under the 2006 Abuja Agreement **(https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2006/05/06/sudanese-rebels-sign-peace-plan-for-darfur-span-classbankheadus-pressured-parties/dd714967-7133-4d78-9571-cf5bc026de67/)** , then returned to armed opposition before becoming Darfur's governor under the 2020 Juba Agreement **(https://www.sudaninthenews.com/juba-peace-deal-report/5h5whnj45lrtnqrhbccddxpvjij79f)** .

Likewise, removing Transitional Sovereignty Council **(https://www.sudanembassy.nl/transitional-sovereignty-council/)** chairman Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo will not accomplish much if bearing arms remains a route to political power and representation. This pattern of converting military influence into political legitimacy must change; otherwise, Sudan's transition will do nothing more than replace one illegitimate military ruler with another.

Who Speaks for Civilians?

The first criterion for civilian participation in Sudan's government is genuine independence from the army, the RSF, other armed factions, and their funding networks. This includes movements that signed the Juba Agreement. In addition, civilian participants should not represent any political entity that emerged through these armed factions.

The second criterion is diversity and fair representation for everyone. Representatives from Darfur, Kordofan, eastern Sudan, and other regions must be drawn from civilian communities rather than the leadership cadres of armed factions. In addition, they should not come solely from the Khartoum elite or the exile community. The government must also include women, young people, and displaced people.

The Native Administration **(https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/articles/the-native-administration-and-peace-committees-in-kurmuk/?location=sudan&theme=)** institutions based in several regions of Sudan have a place in this vision as well. Despite the serious divisions caused by the war, they have historically mediated in disputes and promoted social cohesion, and some of their leaders continue to enjoy respect and influence.

Elements of a Joint Quad-Quintet Mechanism

Washington can help create the conditions for a credible Sudanese civilian transition by leading a joint action plan that includes the following steps:

- **Forming a Quad-Quintet coordination mechanism.** There must be one body clearly responsible for bringing participants together and managing the process. This should be done through a special Quintet representative appointed with the Quad's support. This representative should oversee a mechanism that includes other Quad and Quintet representatives and holds regular meetings on three interconnected tracks—the humanitarian truce, the cessation of hostilities, and the civilian political process—rather than allowing each track to continue separately.

- **Setting a timetable.** This initial phase of the transition process should not exceed six months: the first three months should be devoted to consolidating the humanitarian truce and adopting participation rules, and the following three months to launching a national civilian dialogue and agreeing on the form of the transitional government and the mechanism for establishing it. A public review of progress should take place every sixty days. A process without a time limit would give those who wish to undermine it too many opportunities to empty it of substance.
- **Establishing rules for participation.** To help determine who will participate in both the national civilian dialogue and the transitional civilian government, the special Quintet representative should chair a committee that sets publicly announced criteria, reviews nominations, and has the final say in approving the lists. This would ensure that no internal or external actor can make these decisions unilaterally.
- **Broadening consultations inside and outside Sudan.** Consultations cannot be limited to political coalitions based abroad. To ensure legitimacy and durability, they must incorporate civilian elements independent of the warring parties, including women, young people, trade unions, local communities, displaced people, refugees, and credible Native Administration institutions.
- **Creating an international fund to support the transitional government.** Financed by international and regional donors and managed by an international contact group under Quintet auspices, this fund would cover state employees' salaries and essential services. Such an approach would ensure that external funding passes through a single transparent channel so that it does not become an instrument that various states can use to support their allies within the government. For example, the UAE has been backing the RSF, while Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have supported the SAF. Both they and the various funders and donors in the EU and elsewhere should be required to send their money through this channel.
- **Linking financial support to measurable progress.** Political and institutional support and reconstruction funding should be linked to other cooperative steps. These include efforts to protect civilians, allow access to aid, and advance rather than undermine the political process and monitored security arrangements. Humanitarian assistance should be kept outside of any political bargaining.

Protecting the Transition from Spoilers

Burhan, Hemedti, and their regional allies will resist any transition that could deprive them of influence. After all, reform means building a professional army subordinate to the government, as well as holding senior faction members accountable if they are found to be responsible for war crimes **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-new-us-sanctions-mean-sudan-civil-war)** or other violations. Guarantees must therefore be provided to protect civilians who participate in building the new government from the many pressures they will likely face, such as threats, arrest, or attempts to discredit them. Otherwise, those who hold arms will determine who participates in the national civilian dialogue and transitional government.

Of course, preventing a military monopoly on power in civilian guise will not be easy. One major difficulty will be protecting democracy in a country that has never experienced it and whose institutions remain weak. A successful transition will depend on establishing institutions able to hold those who govern accountable and prevent the concentration of power in the hands of a new dictatorship (whether the despots in question wear the mask of a single party or a coalition). It is therefore important to establish a transitional legislative council that oversees the government, an independent judiciary, financial oversight of state resources, and an independent press.

Finally, Washington must announce from the outset how it will respond if steps to support civilians are sabotaged. During President Trump's first term, Congress passed the Sudan Democratic Transition, Accountability, and Fiscal Transparency Act of 2020 **(https://www.congress.gov/index.php/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/7682)** , which

laid the foundations for supporting civilians and overseeing the finances of Sudan's security apparatus. The law was originally drafted for the transitional period that began in 2019, but Congress must now update it to reflect the reality of the war. In the meantime, **Executive Order 14098 (https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/931826/download?inline)** allows for sanctions on those who obstruct the formation or operation of a civilian government and those who finance this obstruction, whether civilians or military figures. Taken together, these steps make clear to all parties what they will gain by complying—and the price they will pay for attempting to undermine the transition.

Areig Elhag is the Arabic content editor at The Washington Institute and former producer of the award-winning television program Between Two Niles. ❖

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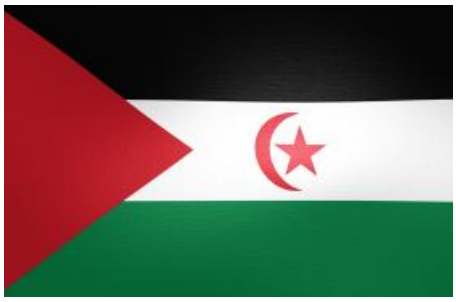
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