

Paralysis in Peacekeeping:

The African Union's Mediation Challenges in Sudan

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Executive Summary

Sudan's escalating war represents more than a national tragedy; it is a critical failure of African collective security that threatens to detonate broader instability across the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. As atrocities mount in West Darfur and El-Fasher, the African Union's (AU) response has been defined by institutional constraints and declining credibility. This policy brief highlights the urgent need for a coordinated African response to Sudan's escalating war, which has exposed the African Union's (AU) institutional constraints and declining credibility as a peace broker. The paper assesses the AU's current inaction through the lens of the ongoing atrocities in West Darfur and El-Fasher and proposes interventions that can restore peace in Sudan. Key challenges include coordination challenges between the AU and the United Nations (UN), inadequate civilian protection mechanisms, and the vested interests of external actors, who continue to undermine inclusive peace efforts. The crisis, which has caused mass displacement, loss of livelihoods, destruction of infrastructure, and cross-border humanitarian strain. The crisis threatens to destabilize the Horn of Africa (HoA) and Sahel by driving cross-border violence, crippling key trade routes—including Red Sea ports vital for Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Chad—and overwhelming fragile neighboring governments already struggling with refugee flows and humanitarian pressures, creating a rapidly escalating regional emergency.

The AU's limited impact reflects deeper structural weaknesses within its peace and security architecture, including overreliance on external partners, fragmented decision-making, and the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms. To reverse this decline, the AU must shift from reactive diplomacy to proactive engagement through the revitalization of AU-UN-IGAD coordination under a unified mediation framework; the deployment of a joint AU-UN stabilization mission in West Darfur with a strong civilian protection mandate; and the inclusion of civil society, women, and youth in peace processes to foster legitimacy and local ownership. Unless decisive, coordinated action is taken, Sudan's fragmentation will deepen, entrenching impunity, exacerbating regional insecurity, and permanently eroding Africa's collective security architecture.

Introduction

The AU plays a vital role in promoting peace and conflict resolution across the continent. However, Sudan's ongoing war has once again revealed the

organization's slow and fragmented approach to conflict resolution. Although the AU successfully mediated the 2019 constitutional agreement that paved the way for Sudan's transition government, the achievement was short-lived. The subsequent relapse into conflict indicates persistent institutional and political weaknesses within the AU's peace and security framework.

Sudan's ongoing war traces back to the 2021 military coup when General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo "Hemedti" of Rapid Support Forces (RSF) jointly ousted Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok's transitional civilian government. Tensions between SAF and the paramilitary RSF escalated in April 2023 over control



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of power, military, and resources. The RSF initially captured key positions in Khartoum, prompting counterattacks by the SAF and months of shifting frontlines. As the fighting spread nationwide, the RSF consolidated its grip on Western Sudan, culminating in its recent capture of El Fasher, the last major SAF stronghold in Darfur (Mishra, 2025). This ongoing struggle for territorial control has deepened Sudan's humanitarian crisis, displacing over 11 million people, forcing more than 4 million to flee into neighboring countries and 150,000 killed (Norwegian Refugee Council 2025; International Rescue Committee 2023). The conflict has devastated basic infrastructure and property, including hospitals and public facilities with estimated damages exceeding US \$100 billion. In addition, delivery of humanitarian aid has been obstructed, and food aid supplies looted, exposing over 25 million people to acute food insecurity. These cascading effects not only deepen Sudan's domestic crisis but destabilize the wider region such as the disruption of South Sudan's oil exports which normally go through the port of Sudan.

The AU's inability to act decisively through its African Peace and Security Structure (APSA) has enabled the conflict to continue unabated. Institutional fragmentation, operational challenges and inadequate political will have left the AU unable to coordinate the monitoring, protection of civilians or engagement with civil society organizations effectively. Coordination with the UN remains limited, and the AU mechanisms rely heavily on external funding, undermining its independence. Meanwhile, external actors heavily fuel the conflict and shape the peace processes. This reveals the growing gap between

the AUs mandate and its ability to act, undermining its credibility and influence in the Sudan peace process.

Against this background, this brief examines why AU mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution have failed to produce lasting results in Sudan despite parallel efforts such as the Juba Peace Agreement, the Jeddah Declaration and the AU roadmap to peace. The absence of a continuous enforcement mechanism has created an implementation vacuum, even with established frameworks such the African Peace Fund (APF), the Continuous Early Warning System (CEWS) and the African Standby Force (ASF). This brief aims to identify operational and political gaps within the AU's peace architecture and propose strategies to strengthen continuity and coordinated action in future interventions.

Analysis of Key Issues

The crisis in Sudan persists not only because of on-the-ground violence but also due to deeper structural challenges within Africa's peace and security framework notably fragmented mediation, competing geopolitical agendas, institutional disunity and the absence of a robust continental response mechanism.

AU's Fragmented Mediation Framework

Sudan's peace process reflects how fragmented mediation can paralyze regional conflict resolution. Since the 2019 transition, multiple actors have stepped into the crisis creating a chaotic negotiation space. Some of these processes include the Juba Peace Agreement (2020) led by

South Sudan, the Jeddah Declaration (2023) facilitated by Saudi Arabia and the United States and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)'s revitalized mediation under Kenya's leadership, all advancing overlapping and contradictory agendas.

The Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) became largely obsolete once the 2023 war erupted because it excluded several key opposition factions. The Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) initially united multiple armed groups, including Minni Minnawi's SLM/A-MM, El-Hadi Idris's SLM/A-TC, SPLM/A-N (Al-Hilu faction), and other smaller Darfuri and Blue Nile militias. Internal disagreements over participation during the JPA negotiations created a de facto split: Minni Minnawi's SLM/A-MM and El-Hadi Idris's SLM/A-TC signed, while SPLM/A-N (Al-Hilu) and other smaller militias stayed out. This division deprived the JPA of broad-based opposition support. The excluded groups distrusted the military-led transitional government and saw few tangible benefits for their constituencies, leaving major actors outside its framework and undermining the agreement's overall effectiveness (Brounéus et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the Jeddah Declaration was framed as a humanitarian ceasefire but lacked enforcement mechanisms and buy-in from regional bodies leading it to collapse (United States Government 2023).

When the AU's 2023 Roadmap for the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan was announced it was already overshadowed by IGAD's initiative led by President William Ruto, who Sudan's military leadership accused of biasness. (Amani Africa, 2025) The IGAD process operating under AU's peace and security framework has in practice pursued its own diplomacy, often diverging from the AU's official line. This parallelism was evident when the AU convened the Expanded Mechanism on 4 December 2023, while IGAD through its Head of State and Government, held its

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41st Extraordinary Assembly on 9 December 2023, each advancing separate mediation tracks towards a Sudanese-led dialogue, effectively creative overlapping initiatives that diluted AU authority (AU PSC, 2023; IGAD, 2023). In addition, initiatives of the 2024 AU High Level Panel on Sudan were slow to operationalize and lacked the authority to consolidate competing tracks (ISS Africa 2024). Additionally, the AU's reliance on coercive diplomacy through sanctions and suspension, has been inconsistent and largely symbolic. Despite its power to invoke Article 7 of the AU Constitutive Act to impose sanctions, it has done little beyond issuing communiques and press statements. Although the recent appointment of President Yoweri Museveni to lead mediation efforts has signaled renewed diplomatic attempt, persistent doubts about AU's neutrality continue to undermine confidence in its effectiveness (AU PSC, 2025; Mutambo, 2025).

Compounding these difficulties is Sudan's lack of a constitutional framework, which leaves negotiations without a shared national anchor and fuels competing claims to legitimacy. Without a binding legal structure, warring factions operate in a vacuum of authority, each asserting its own narrative of control. This constitutional void undermines the credibility of peace agreements, which lack a reference point for governance, transitional justice or power-sharing arrangements (Assal and Yahya, Forthcoming 2026).

Geopolitical Interests

Sudan's war has turned into a geopolitical battleground with foreign actors pursuing military, economic and strategic objectives that complicate peace efforts. Recent reports by the UN Panel of Experts and Amnesty International have documented covert arms transfers into RSF-controlled areas, including UAE-linked cargo flights routed through Chad and weapons used in mass atrocities in West Darfur (UN,

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2024; Amnesty International, 2024). These transfers violate the UN arms embargo originally imposed in July 2004 under Security Council Resolution 1556, which prohibits the supply of weapons to non-governmental entities in Darfur (UNSC, 2004). The embargo was later expanded and remains in force through September 2025 under Resolution 2750 (UNSC, 2024). Since 2018, the UAE has invested over US\$6 billion in Sudan spanning agricultural projects, foreign reserves and Red Sea port infrastructure aimed at securing food imports and regional influence (The Conversation, 2024). This strategic footprint intersects with financial and logistical networks linked to the conflict economy, particularly the gold trade routed to UAE from RSF-controlled areas. These networks have provided the RSF with off-budget revenue streams and operational advances that have sustained its military campaign (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are reported to support the SAF further entrenching the conflict in overlapping regional agendas. These rivalries have crystallized within the US-led Quad Peace Process. While framed as a diplomatic platform, the Quad has enabled these actors to coordinate negotiations while simultaneously advancing divergent national priorities. Specifically, Saudi Arabia seeks regional security and stability; Egypt prioritizes control over Nile water flows; and the United States pursues strategic influence and stability in the Red Sea corridor. Through the Quad, regional actors have leveraged US power to enforce their agendas and shape the outcome of Sudan's conflict in line with these interests (Reuters, 2025).

By presenting themselves as neutral brokers, these powers have gradually displaced continental leadership eroding the AU's authority to convene and steer peace efforts. This dilution of legitimacy is compounded by the AU's own internal fragmentation, leaving its role increasingly symbolic.

Institutional Disunity and Political Volatility

The AU's peace and security structure is anchored in the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), a framework built to anticipate, prevent and resolve conflicts. Its five pillars include the Peace and Security Council (PSC), the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), the Africa Peace Fund (APF), the African Standby Force (ASF) and the Panel of the Wise. The AU Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD) framework is intended to anchor Africa's capacity to finance and sustain recovery initiatives but remains chronically underfunded and reliant on external donors highlighting challenges in resource mobilization as well as weak member-states commitment. APSA represents Africa's most ambitious attempt at collective security, but in practice it lacks political will (AU, 2012).

Before Sudan's war erupted in 2023, both CEWS and IGAD's Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanisms (CEWARN) flagged rising tensions and political instability as early as 2021 yet no preventive mission strategy followed (IGAD, 2022). The PSC issued communiques and convened high level meetings, but its response was limited to appeals rather than action. The ASF remains dormant due to underfunding and lack of consensus among regional

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blocs. The Panel of the Wise mandate to intervene quietly in early-stage conflicts failed to engage.

While the AU and the UN represent twin pillars of continental and global peace governance, coordination between them has long been fragmented, hampered by overlapping mandates and unclear divisions of labor. The AU played a pivotal role in brokering Sudan's 2019 constitutional declaration and the subsequent transitional power-sharing agreement; however, the AU treated it as a conclusion rather than the beginning of sustained oversight. On the other hand, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) established the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) in June 2020 to support Sudan's democratic transition, assist in peacebuilding and coordinate humanitarian action. Despite renewed mandates, the mission faced hostility from Sudan's leadership culminating in its termination in December 2023 (United Nations 2023). While the UNSC continued to issue appeals for cease fire and humanitarian access, these pronouncements lacked enforcement capacity. The AU, meanwhile, offered no alternative mechanism to replace it or enforce the accord.

Although the AU continues to champion the principle of "African ownership", that ownership remains largely vague. The silence of African leaders over Sudan's collapse reflects a deeper political inertia and an unspoken pact of non-interference concealed as respect for sovereignty. This collective reluctance to confront one of the continent's deadliest conflicts exposes the moral and diplomatic paralysis of Africa's

peace architecture and the unwillingness to act on its own principles (ISS Africa, 2024).

Absence of Robust Field Mechanisms

The absence of robust field mechanisms in Sudan has exposed deep institutional and operational fragilities across both national and international response systems. In the context of the AU and the United Nations, "field mechanisms" typically refer to peacekeeping missions, observer teams, early warning systems and humanitarian coordination units designed to provide real-time response and protection on the ground. In Sudan, none of these structures are presently functional. The withdrawal of UNITAMS left the country without any structured peace operation or coordinated humanitarian presence. No AU mission followed. This vacuum has magnified the crisis, allowing violence, famine and displacement to spiral with minimal oversight or protection.

Nationally, the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), which was mandated to coordinate the operations of local and international NGOs, has been repurposed as a security arm of the government. Instead of facilitating emergency relief, it now imposes restrictions on movement, data collection and humanitarian access. Amnesty International and other monitors have reported that both government forces and armed groups obstruct humanitarian agencies.

The lack of structured engagement with Sudanese civil society has weakened both humanitarian response and political legitimacy. Prior to 2019, several peace

agreements failed to gain traction precisely because Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) were excluded from negotiations. Without local buy-in, these agreements were seen as elite-driven and disconnected from the realities on the ground. Over 2,800 national groups ceased operations by mid-2023, most of them registered under the restrictive 2006 Voluntary and Humanitarian Works Act. The 2019 revolution briefly opened civic participation but military takeover in 2021 reversed those gains. Civil society groups operate under constant threat from military intelligence and RSF. A few organizations such as Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIWA), Sudan Human Rights Monitor (SHRM) and the Darfur Network for Human Rights remain active and engaged with bodies like IGAD, UNITAMS and the EU but their work is constrained by bureaucracy, funding delays and poor coordination from international partners (International IDEA, 2024).

The consequences of poor mechanisms reflect on the continued food insecurity, where 24.6 million people are facing acute hunger while 2 million people are at risk of famine. Humanitarian access remains obstructed as warring parties politicize aid delivery, while mass atrocities have displaced over 12 million and forced 4.2 million to flee into Chad, South Sudan and the Central African Republic. The collapse of public health infrastructure and use of sexual violence as an instrument of war are dismantling Sudan's social fabric. In El-Fasher, the last remaining hospital, Saudi, has come under attack with over 450 people killed within its premises underscoring the scale of impunity (WHO, 2025).

Conclusion

Sudan today is an illustration of Africa's collective security failure. In Darfur and El-Fasher, RSF operations have turned communities into sites of targeted executions, systematic attacks on civilians and sexual violence against women

and girls from the Massalit, Nuba and Zaghawa communities. Essential services have collapsed with hospitals destroyed, leaving survivors without medical care ultimately exposing them to extreme fear and trauma. The relentless violence has created a massive displacement crisis into

Chad, South Sudan and the Central African Republic amplifying regional instability.

The AU's continued inaction will deepen Sudan's political, social and economic collapse. RSF control over key regions in West Darfur is eroding what remains of

state authority, tearing Sudan's social and economic cohesion. Unless the AU moves beyond symbolic diplomacy and deploys an enforceable strategy, Sudan will become the epicenter of a regional collapse that reshapes the political and humanitarian landscape for generations to come.

Recommendations

1. The AU in coordination with the United Nations, should:
 - a) Deploy a rapid peacekeeping and civilian protection mission to West Darfur through a neutral coalition of the willing.
 - b) Adopt a joint analysis and coordination framework, including real-time intelligence sharing, to avoid duplication of effort and improve the sequencing of missions.
 - c) Establish an AU-UN-Quad Compact to ensure strategic alignment, resource coherence and unified decision-making in Sudan's stabilization efforts.
2. The AU and its key partners including IGAD, AU member states, UN-agencies, and humanitarian actors should:
 - a) Integrate trained police units and community-based organizations into civilian protection operations to enhance humanitarian access and community security.
 - b) Operationalize AU-UN pooled financing mechanisms to rapidly sustain humanitarian deployment, peacebuilding, and post-conflict recovery efforts.
3. The AU-appointed mediator, President Yoweri Museveni should:
 - a) Lead an inclusive shuttle diplomacy-based mediation process between the warring factions.
 - b) Advocate for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, guaranteed humanitarian access and political dialogue without preconditions.

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Getrude Maina is an analyst and emerging voice in global governance and regional integration. She holds a degree in Disaster Management and International Diplomacy and brings two years of experience in legal administration work. She applies an evidence-based approach to translating complex data into actionable policy recommendations, with a focus on governance and regional integration in Africa. She is particularly interested in strengthening institutional capacity and designing frameworks that promote sustainable and effective regional cooperation.

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