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Assessment of the Structured Roles Played by IGAD in the Conflict Management of South Sudan



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INSIDE

Assessment of the Structured Roles Played by IGAD in the conflict Management of South Sudan 1

South Sudan: The Cowboy Hat and the Burden of a Wounded Nation 13

Corruption, an Ignored Threat to Security in the Horn of Africa 26

Climate, Conflict and Displacement in the Turkana-Omo Basin: Risks and Pathways to Resilience 35

Abstract

The article examines the factors responsible for the insecurity in South Sudan, such as economic vulnerability and low governance capacity, mismanagement in the oil sector, proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons. The challenges faced by IGAD in managing the conflict of South Sudan such as the problems of representation, power, resource sharing, interruption of the peace process by the individuals, warlords and other groups who are benefitting from the instability or chaos. Rivalry among member states, external interference, lack of sufficient political will and financial constraints were highlighted. The measures taken by IGAD as a conflict management strategy in the management of the conflict. To achieve

this, the article looked at the history of the conflict and the actors involved in the conflict's mediation processes. In addition, the study found out that IGAD has been instrumental in the management of the South Sudan conflict which is in line with its mission of restoring peace, increased cooperation and environmental protection of member states. It recommends that, the problems of rivalries, political interference, as well as external forces and deep rooted regional divisions in the mediation process among the regional powers of the authority need to be addressed in order to resolve the conflict.

Introduction

The Horn of Africa is one of the multi-ethnic and unstable regions in the World. Border conflicts such as that of Ethiopia and Eritrea, Sudan and South Sudan, tribal wars in South Sudan, clashes that occur between governments in power which want to keep the existing status quo and nationalist motivated groups that struggle to manipulate and address the interests of certain group to break away from the existing political entities and become sovereign, or join other states which they think are ethically compatible have made the Horn of Africa quite unstable. South Sudan declared independence from Sudan in 2011, becoming the world's newest country with the backing of the Western powers. But after two years, civil war erupted in the Africa's newest country. South Sudan remains one of the most conflict-ridden countries in the world. It suffers from recurring insurgencies supported by habitual, and clan war and some external actors. IGAD faces the daunting task of helping to resolve unrest in South Sudan that has seen many decades of warfare.

The country is located in north-eastern Africa with an estimated population of over eleven million (World Bank, 2023). South Sudan is bounded on the North by Sudan; on the East by Ethiopia; on the South by Kenya, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo; and on the West by the Central African Republic; its rich biodiversity includes lush savannah, swamplands, and rainforests that are home to many species of wildlife. Prior to 2011, South Sudan was part of Sudan, its neighbor to the north. South Sudan's population, predominantly African cultures who tend to adhere to Christian or animist beliefs, was long at odds with Sudan's largely Muslim and Arab northern government. South Sudan's capital is Juba. The largest ethnic group is the Dinka, who constitute about two-fifths of the population, followed by the Nuer, who constitute about one-fifth.

Other groups include the Zande, the Bari, the Shilluk, and the Anywa (Anwak). There is a small Arab population in South Sudan (Nderi, 2020). Under the interim constitution of 2005, both English and Arabic were official working languages, although English had been acknowledged as the principal language in what is now South Sudan since 1972 (Sudan Tribune, 2005).

Decades of civil war in Sudan, fought largely in what is now South Sudan, took a toll on the population. It was estimated that between 1983, when a census was carried out, and in 2005, when the highly anticipated Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed, more than two million people died and some 4.5 million were displaced, many of whom were southern Sudanese. After the signing of the CPA, many southern Sudanese returned to the region, especially during the run-up to the 2011 referendum on southern independence (Moschetti, 2017).

The conflict began as a feud between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and to the Vice President Riek Machar. It soon spiralled into fighting among several factions, engulfing the country in ethnic violence and eventually producing a devastating humanitarian crisis because years of conflict, displacement and underdevelopment have limited people's livelihood opportunities and has marginalized women's formal employment opportunities and weakened family's ability to cope with the protracted crisis and sudden shock. The conflict has forced nearly 4.2 Million South Sudanese to leave their homes in search for safety in neighbouring countries (OCHA, 2019). Human rights abuses, mass rape and potential war crimes have been documented on both sides of the conflict between forces loyal to Vice President Riek Machar and his old foe President Salva Kiir.

IGAD has been engaged in the situation there because of the failure of regional initiatives waged by African Union. Earlier to the African Mission in South Sudan, a number of peace conferences were held to create a suitable political environment to enable the different South Sudanese factions and clan elders negotiate power sharing and restore government in this war-torn nation, but up to date South Sudan is in chaos. South Sudan remains not only a plight of insecurity to itself while leaving its people victims of severe military clashes and dreadful state of humanitarian crises; it has also become a threat to the peace and security of the Horn of Africa as a whole.

Factors Responsible for the Conflict in South Sudan

Since December 2013, South Sudan has continued to face political instability moving from one crisis to another. The emerging security threats that South Sudan faces, is a reflection of its geography, cultural diversity, and political history. The State of South Sudan is weak and underdeveloped; it inherited lack of governing structures and institutions together with political and social glue that could hold the country together to the extent that, the state cannot carry out its Westphalian roles and functions (Nderi, 2020, Aldo, 2018).

This has also shown that from history, the most serious factors that are responsible for the conflict in South Sudan are internally driven by weak or failed state inability to ensure security to all citizens and their properties (Magnus, 2017). Other emerging security threats of South Sudan are cattle raiding, killings, armed robberies, abduction, rape and small arms and light weapons. Insecurity is still a great concern at the states and the national level. Other sources of conflict

include the creation of new administrative areas, conflict over access to land for agriculture, grazing cattle, land grabbing for various purposes, political interference in inter-community relationships and poverty. There has been a rise of criminals from neighboring countries who work with local criminals to engage in theft, fraud, money laundering and selling counterfeit goods. This is as a result of the borders being porous, long and difficult to monitor (BICC, 2015). Other factors are as follows:

Vulnerability of the Economy and Low Governance Capacity

The Government of South Sudan is still unable to provide basic services to all such as health, water, electricity and education and many people are left to compete and fight over meager resources. It does not appear to be felt in all the areas of the country. It has no capacity to handle ethnic conflicts through dialogue. Also, there is poor infrastructure that hinders provision of security and other services. There are credible complaints of corruption, bias and nepotism against the GOSS. The economy is still dependent on oil export and funding by donors thus



Tribal fighters chant and sing songs of war in defense of their kinsmen, land and property (Photo Credits: Goran Tomasevic, Reuters)



The numbers of illicit arms in circulation in the country has contributed to a deteriorating security situation in recent years, which has led to widespread acts of armed violence which have resulted in the killings and maiming of innocent civilians including women and children

increasing its vulnerability to external shocks. The non-oil sector economy is still dominated by cattle husbandry.

Difficulties in Maintaining Law and Order

South Sudan continues to experience serious insecurity concerns at the grassroots levels from the armed rebellion, militia activities and army defections manifest an unstable security sector. The South Sudan Air force (SSAF) is faced with a number of obstacles such as the need for an effective transformation into a professional, inclusive and independent army with the right structures and discipline. South Sudan is still engrossed in conflict with the north and a number of internal armed groups are still in operation. There are no adequate funds to support reforms due to the conflict with the north over oil transportation. The South Sudan Air force (SSAF) is unable to engage in impartial intervention during ethnic conflict because of ethnic affiliations (Adele Harmer & Monia, 2017).

Proliferation of Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons

One of the most pervasive challenges facing problems facing South Sudan and one which it has been struggling to reverse since before independence in July 2011, is the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons. Based on survey conducted in government controlled areas only, the Small Arms Survey that estimated between 232,000-601,000 were in circulation in South Sudan in 2018. The numbers of illicit arms in circulation in the country has contributed to a deteriorating security situation in recent years, which has led to widespread acts of armed violence which have resulted in the killings and maiming of innocent civilians including women and children. This has also increased incidents of armed cattle raiding and has continued to contribute to instability

throughout South Sudan, including Upper Nile, Jonglei, Lakes, Warrap and Unity States (SAFERWORLD, 2018).

North–South Strain Relationship

Republic of South Sudan (ROSS) views Sudan as big threat to its security. This view is exacerbated by the failure to demarcate the North/South border, military mobilization by both countries and recurrent confrontations along the border. South Sudan rebels are seen as proxies of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF). This continue to pose a challenge with the long unmarked border, the fate of the three States of Blue Nile, Abyei and South Kordofan is yet to be decided. The presence of valuable resources such as oil along the border has also escalated the conflict. These factors define the political dimension of the current insecurity, which has led to the emergence of several armed groups since 2005. Lack of clear boundary demarcation among communities, Districts, Payams and Counties also compound the problem (Craze, 2013).

The Formation of IGAD

IGAD was created in 1996 to supersede the Intergovernmental Authority on Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD), which was founded in 1986 (Citaristi, 2022). In 1983 and 1984, six countries in the Horn of Africa (Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda) took action through the United Nations to establish an intergovernmental body to collectively combat drought and desertification in the region (Magu, 2023). The Assembly of Heads of State and Government met in January 1986 to sign the agreement that officially launched IGAD with headquarters in Djibouti.

On 21st March 1996 in Nairobi, the Assembly signed “Letter of Instrument to amend the IGADD Charter” establishing the revitalized regional organization with a new name, “Intergovernmental Authority on Development”. IGAD with expanded areas of regional cooperation and a new organizational structure was launched during the Summit of the Heads of State and Government on 25th November 1996 in Djibouti (World Bank, 1997). The State of Eritrea became the seventh member after attaining independence in 1993 and South Sudan joined in 2011 (IGAD, 2019). The regional organization faces the daunting task of helping to resolve unrest in South Sudan that has seen many decades of warfare (African Union, 2019).

IGAD'S Efforts in the Peace building Process of South Sudan

IGAD spearheaded a mediation initiative in South Sudan following the outbreak of the Civil War in 2013. By playing a leading role in diplomatic and peace negotiation such as post referendum arrangement between North and South as part of Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) implementation. Negotiation with dissidents in Jonglei State (JS), Upper Nile State and State, reconciliation efforts and peace conferences facilitated by development partners (DPs) and NGOs. The Creation of Institutions such as former Peace Commission, South Sudan Legislative Assembly (SSLA), Committee of Peace and State-Level Peace Structures. Other strategies IGAD has employed in the management of the conflict in South Sudan are; engaging high diplomatic mediation such as IGAD Secretariat and peace ambassadors, Building capacities of national security, making ultimatums for different leaders, the use of Gacaca courts like the ones used in Rwanda (Roble, 2017).

Some of the measures also taken by IGAD to mitigate the security threats in South Sudan included its mission to help to manage the crisis, offering of reinforcement, employing early warning mechanisms to prevent conflict, Approval of Protection & Deterrence Force (PDF) to come to South Sudan, Special coordination with United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) peacekeepers battalion on conflicts zones, Deployment of Monitors through the Monitoring and Verification Mechanisms (MVM), Built capacities of national security and Built capacity of South Sudanese security organs (Ajang, 2016).

The peace negotiation in South Sudan had taken many years. In the mediation process, different parties have been participating. Among these, IGAD has been mentioned as the primary organ that struggles for ending the civil war in the country. The peace talks, mediated by IGAD, were led by special envoys that came from the big three regional powers of the authority. These are Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan (OKWUOKEI et al, 2024). Though IGAD had put much effort to the greatest extent possible, the warring parties are reluctant to reach into agreement. Apart from the disputants, the member states of IGAD are also accused of their rivalries and deep-rooted regional division in the processes of mediation.

In 2014 alone, over six (6) peace talks were held in respect of the conflict in South Sudan. The first round of Peace

began on January 4, 2014 in Ethiopia the focus was on reaching into a cessation of hostilities agreement; release the prisoners and a process of dialogue, However, in the end, the cessation of hostilities agreement was signed on January 23, 2014. The second round peace talks was also conducted on March 2014. The authorization of an IGAD Protection and Deterrent Force (PDF) which was designed to monitor and enforce the ceasefire was carried out. As part of this force, 90 Ethiopian peacekeepers were deployed in South Sudan. The third was in April 2014, it was also ineffective and short-lived. It has been manifested by the fighting of the two opposing groups on May 22, 2014, that caused the displacement of over 2,000 people in the state of Upper Nile. The fourth round of talks were conducted on June 9th which then followed with the fifth round of peace talks that took place on July 20, 2014, to compromise the complaint (Unfair inclusivity of IGAD in the selection of stakeholders' process) of the rebelling parties. The sixth round peace talks took place on November 10, 2014 (Muhabie, 2018).

The IGAD-PLUS Peace Negotiation Process (2015)

IGAD had widened its mediation process into the "IGAD-PLUS" initiative, which is composed of the IGAD itself, the African Union (AU), United Nations, China, U.S., UK, European Union (EU), Norway and the IGAD Partners Forum (IPF). The "IGAD-PLUS" initiative is intended to provide an international facade behind IGAD in resolving the conflict that severely degrades the country within this short period of time. Notwithstanding with the challenges of IGAD, it has to be appreciated for its prior responses in addressing the conflict. Starting from the beginning of the conflict, IGAD has led much effort in mediating the worrying parties to come into negotiations and to stop the disputes (The Sudan Tribune, 2015).

On August 17, 2015, a historical IGAD-PLUS peace negotiation (deal) was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The proposal was comprehensive and inclusive. In the first place, it demands a permanent ceasefire between the warring parties not later than 72 hours after signing the accord. In the second place, the peace proposal has given 30 days for militants to assemble and canton. Moreover, it explicitly stated that the Kampala's troops to leave the country within 45 days and other overseas militia forces to be disarmed and back to their home. The peace deal is also promising to return Dr. Machar to his former position, the vice presidency. On the due date, only Riek Machar, leader of SPLM/IO and Pagan



Heads of State of IGAD member states in a group photo after the Peace and Security meeting of the HoA on February 26, 2024 (Photo Credit: Africa News Channel)

Amum, on behalf of the Former Political Detainees signed the deal. However, President Salva Kiir regrets to sign the agreement and requests an additional 15 days for consultations. Finally, on 26th August 2015, he signed the deal with the rebelling parties except some serious reservations. (IGAD, August, 2015).

In the first ever State of IGAD address in Mombasa, on 8th December, 2020, the Secretary General of IGAD, Workneh, stated that IGAD has played an instrumental role in the mediations proceedings, the formation of the Revitalize Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) on the 2nd of February, 2020. That IGAD has also engaged in the Shuttle-Diplomacy in order to get the parties to agree on responsibility-sharing at state and local government level. And IGAD has continued to advocate for the engagement of non-signatory parties to the peace agreement with some degree of success by hosting the South Sudan opposition movement Alliance (SSOMA) in Rome on the need to observe the cessation of hostilities. IGAD has also remained engaged in the monitoring and verifications of Permanent Ceasefire and Transitional Security arrangement in South Sudan through CTSAMVM and the Revitalised Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC). (Workneh, 2020).

In the second State of the IGAD Region Address, of December 2021, Workneh also highlighted the

tremendous progress of Republic of South Sudan in implementing Peace Agreement particularly Chapter 1 governance arrangement and the successful implementation of Chapter 2 on the Permanent Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangement that has marked a turning point for the peace process in South Sudan. It was the issues around the implementation of the provisions of the chapter that triggered an internal conflict within the SPLM/IO and resulted in clashes in the border area of Jabal Magemis in August, 2021.

IGAD had successfully engaged with the various stakeholders to the internal dispute and encouraged the opening of Avenue for dialogue. The engagement established the unification and redeployment of the necessary unified forces as an urgent priority for the people and Government of Republic of South Sudan. He went further and stated that IGAD in conjunction other development partners on the ground has provided necessary political support and have also called upon for the Revitalized Transitional Government to allocate and avail the required financial and material resources and also called upon the International community to lift those sanctions that are obstacles to the effective implementation of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the conflict in the Republic of South Sudan. (IGAD, 2025).

In March, 2025 IGAD expresses alarm over reports of the house arrest of H.E Dr. Riek Machar Teny, First Vice President of the Republic of South Sudan and the escalating political tensions in South Sudan. These developments seriously undermine the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and risk plunging the back into violent conflict. This made Dr. Workneh to call on all parties to immediately refrain from unilateral actions that violates the spirit of and letter of the R-ARCSS, which remains the only viable framework for sustainable peace in South Sudan. IGAD reaffirms its commitment to the full implementation of the R-ARCSS and urge all stakeholders to act responsibly in the interest of peace and national unity. (IGAD, March, 2025).

IGAD's Challenges in the Management of South Sudan Conflict

South Sudan has been in statelessness for more than two decades. There are different factors or challenges of IGAD in conflict management and resolution in the Horn of Africa particularly in South Sudan. The disintegration of the South Sudan was difficult for conflict resolutions because of the factors are the issue of representation, power, resource sharing and reconciliation. Clannism also has been the major obstacle for the volatility of South Sudan and for the challenges of IGAD conflict resolution. The peace processes were interrupted by the individuals, warlords and other groups who are benefitting from the instability or chaos (Magara, 2025).

Another biggest challenge faced by IGAD in its South Sudan conflict management effort is political interference as well as External interference and interests from Uganda, Sudan, and other neighboring countries. Others were lack of credibility since some of the IGAD members are directly involved in the conflict and is affecting the mediation processes, (Anelle, 2008; Kidist, 2009; Mekonnen, 2019). The effectiveness of IGAD in preventing and minimizing the impact of armed conflict in South Sudan is hampered by the following factors:

- i. **Rivalry Amongst Member States:** The case of IGAD had always been of rivalry and mutual suspicion among its members. This rivalry had led to a situation of difficulty in framing and achieving common positions on South Sudan and Sudan. For instance, Ethiopia and Eritrea had extended their own wars to South Sudan by supporting and arming different South Sudan factions, thereby aggravating and extending the conflict, since 1998.
- ii. **Regional Instability:** The IGAD is inundated with significant regional issues. Member states are confronted by many intra and interstate conflicts. Sudan had gone from crisis to crisis; Ethiopia had fought long, bitter wars and is still battling internal insurrections; Kenya remains a fragile state whilst the duo of Uganda and Eritrea are faced with internal issues of armed rebellion and political challenges. The regional states have a long history of intervening in each other's internal affairs and supporting rebel groups for mutual destabilization. Apart from the intra and interstate conflicts the roles of the Arab States in undermining the effectiveness of IGAD is significant. Egypt has repeatedly been accused of undermining the peace initiatives in South Sudan.
- iii. **Lack of a Regional Power:** the fact that the region lacks a regional power has meant that no country has the capacity to assume an unchallenged regional leadership, close to Nigeria's leadership of ECOWAS and South Africa's leadership of SADC. Ethiopia has the military and population required but lacks a strong economic base whilst Kenya does not have the military power to assume regional leadership. Sudan has oil wealth, but is weakened by internal conflicts such as the current civil war, whilst South Sudan is engaged in multiple ethnic armed conflicts.
- iv. **Financial Constraints & Lack of Political Will:** IGAD lacks the necessary institutional powers

The conflict has forced nearly 4.2 Million South Sudanese to leave their homes in search for safety in neighbouring countries (OCHA, 2019). Human rights abuses, mass rape and potential war crimes have been documented on both sides of the conflict between forces loyal to Vice President Riek Machar and President Salva Kiir

... significant limitations persist, including the absence of peacekeeping operations, weak enforcement mechanism, technical loophole in peace agreement and persistent internal and external political interferences. Lack of standard monitoring system and limited capacity to address competing member interests further constrain IGAD's effectiveness

to play a significant role in South Sudan's peace processes. IGAD has been dependent on donors, mainly the IGAD Partners Forum (IPF), comprising donor states and organizations, to execute its projects. The operational cost of IGAD, however, has been covered by member states' contribution. As a result, IGAD faces serious financial constraints. (Ayodele & Dauda, 2015; Bruce, 2017).

Conclusion

South Sudan is among the poorest and least-developed countries in the world. The civil war that began in late 2013 severely disrupted the economy of the country. A peace agreement signed in August provided for the creation of a transitional power-sharing government that would include members of the current administration as well as members from the rebels. The incumbent president remained in place and appointed a first vice president, selected from the rebel group, in accordance with the terms of the peace agreement. Despite these moves, the country is still facing a lot of challenges which has paved the way for the intervention of international organizations like IGAD in the management of the conflict. IGAD's role in peace mediation, stakeholders' engagement, power-sharing proposals and humanitarian assistance has been partially effective.

Other strategies employed in the management of the conflict had to do with the engagement of high diplomatic mediation such as IGAD secretariat and peace ambassadors, building capacities of national security, making ultimatums for different leaders, and coming up

with an early warning system for conflict eruption in South Sudan, the widening of IGAD's mediation process into the "IGAD-PLUS" initiative, the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan by president Salva Kiir and Dr Riek Machar in September, 2018 for being committed to forming a Transitional Government on November 12, 2019. The monitoring and verifications of Permanent Ceasefire and Transitional Security arrangement in South Sudan through CTSAMVM and the Revitalized Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC) in December, 2020 respectively.

However, significant limitations persist, including the absence of peacekeeping operations, weak enforcement mechanism, technical loophole in peace agreement and persistent internal and external political interferences. Lack of standard monitoring system and limited capacity to address competing member interests further constrain IGAD's effectiveness.

Recommendations

- ❑ The problems of rivalries, political interference, as well as external forces and deep-rooted regional divisions in the mediation process among the regional powers of the authority such as Uganda, Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia and other neighbouring countries need to be addressed in order to resolve the conflict bedeviling South Sudan.
- ❑ There is the need for the promotion of political values at the expense of short term political gains through the promotion of democracy, by organizing free and fair elections, respect for human rights, tolerance for diversity and economic empowerment of the people of South Sudan.
- ❑ There is the need to develop a new political structure, which defines more clearly the democratic rights of all South Sudanese, lays down the rules of political competition and which accounts for development of stronger political institutions not only among the leading political parties but others.
- ❑ The need for the long process of integrating, disarming, and ultimately reducing the size of the military and militia in South Sudan which requires a much more active and participating role of the international community.
- ❑ There is the need for the international community to give more encouragement and material support to

the people of South Sudan and to review sanctions that were extended by the UN Security Council on 26th of May 2022, as it will continue to compound the economic misery that the people of South Sudan are currently in.

- ❑ There is the need for more financial backing for IGAD to enable it carry out its mandate, implementing and enforcing of its decisions by the members to enable it addressed the conflict affecting the Horn of Africa and South Sudan in particular.
- ❑ There is the importance of the immediate recommitment by all parties to respect the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement; the sustenance of Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU) is also important to facilitate the smooth operations of the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangement and Monitoring Mechanism to bring an end to the prolonged conflict in South Sudan.
- ❑ The IGAD-PLUS should also become a unifying vehicle to enable it engage the unpredictable internal dynamics in South Sudan more effectively, and address the divisions among IGAD members

that has continue to enable the parties to prolong the war.

- ❑ Through proper tracing, tracking, collection and destruction of illicit weapons in South Sudan will help in reducing the number of arms in circulation thereby reducing access to such arms and making them unaffordable to many which will help in addressing the problems of cattle raiding, armed robbery, organized crimes and ethnic conflict.
- ❑ The government of South Sudan should also adhere to an urgent call for a definitive roadmap for the transition of and elections by December 2026, with clear milestone for constitutional reforms, electoral preparations and institutional reconstitution.
- ❑ There is the need to promote impartial and inclusive dialogue processes and the strengthening of internal accountability frameworks.
- ❑ Finally, there is need for the expansion of IGAD's mandate to include peacekeeping and disarmament operations, institutionalizing monitoring and enforcement bodies.

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South Sudan: The Cowboy Hat and the Burden of a Wounded Nation

By Mariah Faridah Muli

Abstract

In September 2025, First Vice President Riek Machar was formally charged with treason, murder, and crimes against humanity related to a March attack by the White Army militia on a military base in Nasir, which reportedly killed over 250 soldiers. United Nations (UN) personnel were also attacked. These events mark a sharp escalation in South Sudan's fragile power-sharing arrangement between Machar and President Salva Kiir, a peace pact that has been undermined by ethnic tensions, political distrust, and sporadic violence since the end of the civil war in 2018. Central to the current crisis is not only the legal dimension of the charges but also the symbolic struggle over legitimacy and identity epitomized by Kiir's iconic cowboy hat as well as the deeper ethnic rivalries between Dinka and Nuer communities. The key question this article poses is: what do these developments portend for governance, peacemaking, and security in South Sudan and the wider Horn of Africa region? Drawing on conflict-analysis, historical precedent, interviews, and recent media reporting, the article demonstrates that this crisis reveals the extreme fragility of South Sudan's institutions, the hollowing of trust between political actors, and the heavy burden falling on civilians caught in the middle.

Introduction

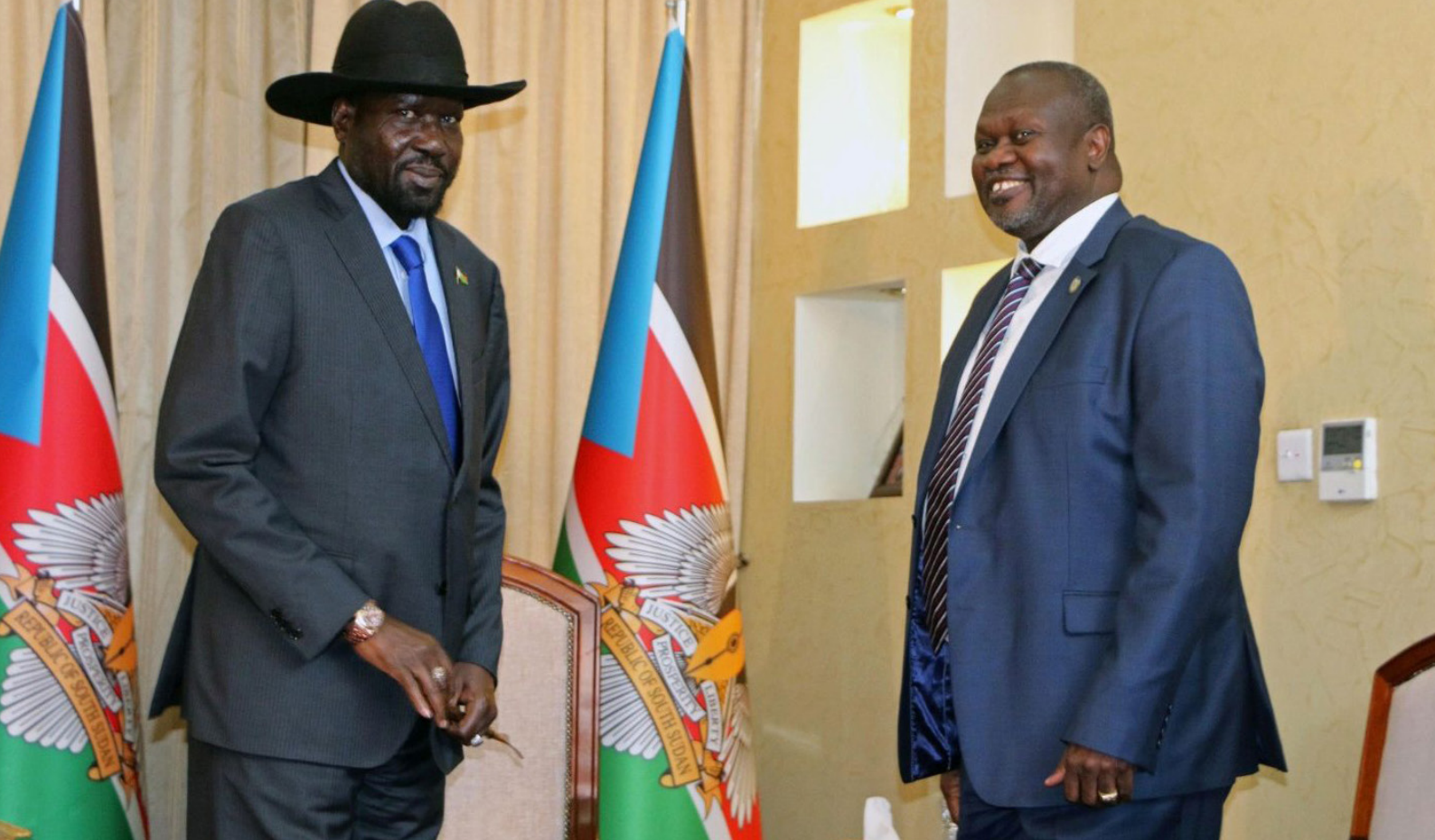
In South Sudan, few symbols are as instantly recognizable or as laden with meaning as President Salva Kiir's black cowboy hat. Often seen donning this trademark Stetson hat in public appearances, Kiir transformed what began as a gift from then-U.S. President George W. Bush in 2006 into a visual emblem of authority, leadership, and national identity (Reuters, 2025). The cowboy hat has come to represent more than mere style; it is a metaphor for the contested power dynamics in a young state still trying to heal from its violent birth and subsequent turbulence (Reuters, 2025).

In September 2025, the fragile political fabric of South Sudan was strained further when the First Vice President Riek Machar was formally charged with treason, murder, and crimes against humanity. According to Justice Minister Joseph Geng Akech, Machar is alleged to have had a leadership role in coordinating a White Army militia assault in March on a military base in Nasir, which reportedly resulted in over 250 soldiers' deaths (Reuters, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025). Following the charges, Machar was suspended by President Kiir, and has been under house arrest since March, raising serious concerns among his supporters, regional observers, and international

actors. The transitional unity government established under the 2018 peace agreement, in which Machar and Kiir were to function as political partners despite their long-standing rivalries, now appears severely strained (AP News, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

At the heart of this crisis lies a central tension: can the peace agreement survive when its foundational elements, power-sharing, trust between rival factions and institutional impartiality are being tested so severely? Is the judiciary being used as an instrument of political contestation rather than justice? And what does this moment imply for governance in a country still marked by ethnic fissures, elite maneuvering, and fragile state institutions?

These developments prompt several guiding questions: What does the Machar indictment mean for South Sudan's unity between Dinka and Nuer factions, and between the political center in Juba and peripheral regions? How is the peace deal being reshaped or compromised by this unfolding legal and political drama? And finally, what are the wider implications for stability in the Horn of Africa, a region where cross-border security,



South Sudan's President Salva Kiir Mayardit (left) and former Vice-President Riek Machar (right) (Photo Credit: PETERLOUIS)

displacement, and international diplomatic engagement are deeply intertwined?

By examining the symbolism of leadership, the legal accusations against Machar, and the broader political landscape, this article argues that the current crisis reflects both the fragility of South Sudan's state institutions and the burden borne by its citizens trapped in a liminal space between peace and relapse.

Historical Context of South Sudan's Political Fragility

The political trajectory of South Sudan is best understood as a sequence of deferred promises: nationalist liberation rhetoric under Late President John Garang gave way to the brittle reality of post-independence statecraft under Salva Kiir. Garang's vision of a "New Sudan" combined social transformation and political inclusion, and his leadership of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) provided a unifying narrative for southern resistance to Khartoum (Johnson, 2016). His sudden death in July 2005 in a helicopter crash, only three weeks after becoming Sudan's first Vice President under the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), was a turning point. Official investigations concluded after eight months of the crash reported as bad weather and accidental, but many South Sudanese suspected foul play, fueling enduring conspiracy theories and political mistrust

between rival factions and communities (Rolandsen, 2015; Young, 2012). Some interpreted Garang's death as an assassination designed to weaken southern unity and derail the CPA.

Salva Kiir: From Cattle Camp to Presidency

Salva Kiir Mayardit was born in 1951 in the cattle-keeping community of Gogrial, Warrap State, into the Dinka ethnic group, South Sudan's largest community. Like many young boys in rural Sudan, Kiir spent much of his youth herding cattle, a cultural practice that fostered endurance, responsibility, and early familiarity with leadership roles in communal life (Johnson, 2016). He received limited formal education but joined the Anyanya I movement in the late 1960s during the First Sudanese Civil War (1955–1972). After the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972, Kiir was integrated into the Sudanese army but maintained his southern identity and networks of resistance (Rolandsen, 2015).

When Late President John Garang founded the SPLM/A in 1983, Kiir became one of its earliest recruits and most loyal commanders. Known for his pragmatism, patience, and ability to balance military discipline with clan-based loyalties, Kiir rose to become Garang's deputy in the military structures (Young, 2012). His reputation as a quiet but steadfast lieutenant contrasted with Garang's charismatic and ideological leadership. This "soldier's

temperament” became Kiir’s defining political style: cautious, deliberate, and grounded in consensus among Dinka elders (de Waal, 2014).

Garang’s death in 2005 thrust Kiir into leadership. Many doubted whether his soft-spoken style could command the SPLM’s fractious elite or manage international negotiations. Yet his acceptance as successor was eased by his long service record, reputation for loyalty, and the symbolic support he enjoyed among the Dinka base (Johnson, 2016).

Political Symbolism: The Cowboy Hat and Leadership in South Sudan

Salva Kiir’s black cowboy hat is more than a sartorial choice; it has become an enduring political emblem. The hat reportedly first given to Kiir during a White House visit, by U.S. President George W. Bush in 2006, quickly shifted from personal gift to public trademark, worn consistently at domestic ceremonies and international meetings (Lynch, 2011; Reuters, 2025). For many South Sudanese and international observers, the Stetson projects an image of frontier authority, rugged resilience, and patriarchal guardianship: qualities Kiir has sought to embody as the country’s commander-in-chief and founding president (Johnson, 2016).

Political symbols carry outsized weight in fragile states because they stand in for institutions that are weak, contested, or absent. Classic studies of political symbolism stress how leaders deploy myths, rituals and objects to legitimize authority and mobilize support (Edelman, 1967; Hayward & Dumbuya, 1983). In contexts where formal bureaucracies and rule-bound procedures lack reach or trust, visual markers — flags, uniforms, gifts, or in Kiir’s case a distinctive hat — operate as shorthand for continuity, authenticity, and control (Migdal, 2001). The cowboy hat thus performs a political function: it signals a personalized incumbency when institutional anchors (an independent judiciary, professional bureaucracy, or depoliticized military) remain fragile.

Juxtaposed with Kiir’s cultivated symbolism, is Riek Machar’s trajectory from rebel commander to statesman. Machar’s public persona is less built around an iconic object and more around a narrative of insurgency, split leadership and return to politics, a chronicle that includes the 1991 Nasir split, years of alternating opposition and accommodation, and a reputation as both a consummate operator and a polarizing figure (Rolandsen, 2015;

Johnson, 2016). Where Kiir’s hat visually condenses claims to national guardianship, Machar’s legitimacy has had to be narrated through actions, alliances and compromise — a more precarious form of authority in symbolic terms.

This contrast illustrates a broader analytical point: when personal symbolism substitutes institutional legitimacy, the risk of personalized politics arises. South Sudan’s post-independence governance shows how charismatic or symbolic leadership can paper over institutional insufficiencies while failing to build resilient state capacities (de Waal, 2014). The cowboy hat helps make Kiir visible and memorable as leader, but it does not by itself strengthen judicial independence, military professionalism, or inclusive governance. Indeed, the prominence of personal symbols can deepen factional loyalty to individuals rather than to institutions — a dynamic that contributed to the ease with which elite rivalry morphed into mass violence in 2013 (ICG, 2014).

There is also a discursive dimension: symbols shape narratives about rightful rule. Kiir’s hat is frequently invoked in domestic commentary and international reporting as shorthand for his incumbency and the patrimonial networks that sustain it (Reuters, 2025). For opponents and critics, the same symbol can signify ostentation, detachment, or an emblem of exclusionary politics. Machar’s lack of a comparable symbolic artifact means his political identity is more vulnerable to delegitimization through legal charges, accusations of militancy, or contestation over implementation of power-sharing deals (ICG, 2019).

The cowboy hat is a useful lens for understanding South Sudan’s political grammar. It demonstrates how leaders in weak states rely on personal symbolism to assert legitimacy and manage uncertainty, while simultaneously highlighting the limitations of that strategy: symbolic authority cannot substitute for robust institutions.

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The danger is that when symbols are used to mask institutional fragility, governance becomes personalized, accountability erodes, and political disputes — even when dressed in legal language — are more likely to produce instability than durable solutions (Migdal, 2001; de Waal, 2014).

Independence and Disillusionment

When South Sudan achieved independence in 2011, Kiir presided over jubilant celebrations that promised a new dawn. Independence was seen as the culmination of Garang's dream and the sacrifices of decades of war. Yet the new state quickly encountered structural weaknesses. It inherited an army-centric political order, weak civil institutions, and an elite reward system that privileged military patronage and control of oil rents (de Waal, 2014).

Rather than a transition from rebellion to democratic governance, the state became an arena where personalized networks compete for control of resources and offices. Corruption flourishes; in 2012, Kiir himself admitted that billions of dollars in oil revenues had been lost through graft, undermining state legitimacy (de Waal, 2014). The post-independence political elite increasingly rely on ethnic mobilization, with Dinka dominance generating resentment among Nuer and other groups.

Civil War and Humanitarian Crisis

These tensions exploded in December 2013 when Kiir accused his then-deputy Riek Machar of plotting a coup. Machar denied the allegation and fled, but clashes between loyalist and opposition forces quickly escalated. What began as an SPLM power struggle was reframed along ethnic lines, with Dinka-aligned forces clashing against Nuer mobilizations (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2014). The conflict exacted a devastating toll. A study by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine estimated nearly 400,000 excess deaths between 2013 and 2018, half from direct violence and half from indirect causes such as hunger and disease (Checchi et al., 2018). Millions were displaced internally or across borders, with Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia bearing the brunt of the refugee inflows (UNHCR, 2018). UN reports documented atrocities including massacres, sexual violence, and child soldier recruitment (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

The 2018 Peace Agreement and Its Limits

Regional and international actors mediated the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict

in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The deal reinstated Machar as First Vice President and created a fragile power-sharing arrangement (R-ARCSS, 2018). It mandated force integration, constitutional reforms, and preparation for elections. Yet, mistrust between Kiir and Machar remained unresolved. Their rivalry rooted in SPLM factionalism, ethnic politics, and suspicions stretching back to Garang's death continued to cast a shadow over governance (Rolandsen, 2015; ICG, 2019). Implementation of security arrangements stalled, unity government milestones were delayed, and periodic violence reminded citizens of the fragility of peace.

South Sudan's political fragility cannot be understood apart from its leadership trajectories. Kiir's journey from a cattle camp boy to a soldier-president reflects both resilience and the persistence of militarized politics. The contested legacy of Garang, the conspiracy theories surrounding his death, and the enduring Kiir–Machar rivalry illustrate how historical mistrust and factionalism undermine efforts at nation-building. The 2013–2018 civil war exposed the fragility of state institutions, while the 2018 peace agreement has thus far failed to resolve structural tensions. As a result, South Sudan remains haunted by its past even as it seeks a more stable future.

Riek Machar's Political Rise

Machar's trajectory to high office is inseparable from South Sudan's long history of rebellion and fragile coalitions. Born in 1953 in Leer, Unity State, Machar studied engineering in Khartoum before completing a PhD in mechanical engineering at the University of Bradford in the United Kingdom in the 1980s (Young, 2012). Returning to Sudan, he joined the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) under John Garang. However, Machar soon developed deep disagreements with Garang over leadership style and political vision. Where Garang advocated for a "New Sudan" — a reformed, united Sudan — Machar pushed for the right of southern self-determination.

This ideological rift culminated in Machar's 1991 Nasir split, when he and Lam Akol attempted to overthrow Garang. The split fragmented the SPLM/A and unleashed brutal ethnic violence, including the Bor massacre, in which thousands of Dinka civilians were killed by forces aligned with Machar (Johnson, 2016). Although Machar later apologized for the massacre, the episode cemented enduring mistrust between him and Dinka leaders, particularly Salva Kiir (Rolandsen, 2015). In the late 1990s,

Machar briefly aligned with Khartoum before rejoining the SPLM/A, demonstrating a pragmatism that critics describe as opportunistic and that has complicated his reputation among both allies and rivals (Young, 2012).

After Garang's death in 2005, Kiir assumed the presidency of the Government of Southern Sudan, and Machar was appointed vice president in the power-sharing arrangement. Independence in 2011 elevated Kiir to the presidency of South Sudan and Machar to the vice presidency, seemingly institutionalizing their partnership. Yet personal and political tensions soon re-emerged. Machar criticized Kiir's increasingly centralized, authoritarian style and accused him of marginalizing other SPLM leaders. Kiir, in turn, viewed Machar as overly ambitious and unwilling to subordinate himself to presidential authority (de Waal, 2014).

Rift with Kiir and the Road to Crisis

The relationship between Kiir and Machar deteriorated sharply by 2013. Machar announced his intention to challenge Kiir for leadership of the SPLM ahead of elections, prompting Kiir to dismiss him and other

ministers from government in July that year (ICG, 2014). By December, armed clashes erupted in Juba after Kiir accused Machar of plotting a coup. Machar denied the charge and fled, and the SPLM split into factions that fought a devastating civil war along Dinka–Nuer lines.

The 2013–2018 conflict killed nearly 400,000 people and displaced millions (Checchi et al., 2018). International mediation led to the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), which reinstated Machar as first vice president in a fragile coalition government. However, the arrangement was marred by persistent mistrust, slow implementation of reforms, and periodic violence (ICG, 2019). Kiir's allies accused Machar of stalling security sector unification, while Machar complained that Kiir undermined the peace deal by bypassing agreed provisions.

By 2025, these unresolved tensions reached breaking point. The March Nasir attack whether or not Machar directly ordered it was framed by the government as proof of his disloyalty and as a breach of the peace accord. Machar's allies argued that Kiir's camp exploited



Thousands of South Sudanese wave their national flags during a peace ceremony in the capital city of Juba (Photo Credits: AKUOT CHOL Akuot Chol/AFP/Getty Images)

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the incident to sideline him permanently, dismantle SPLM-IO's role in government, and consolidate unilateral control (Al Jazeera, 2025; AP, 2025).

Legal Charges and Political Implications

The charges against Machar of treason, murder, and crimes against humanity carry weighty legal and political implications. Legally, they allege that Machar bears command responsibility for atrocities committed by militias, even if his direct involvement remains contested (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Proving such responsibility in court requires clear evidence of control over armed actors, which is notoriously difficult in South Sudan's fragmented conflict landscape (ICG, 2019). Politically, however, the charges function as an instrument of power: they delegitimize a key rival, fracture opposition networks, and reframe elite disputes as criminal acts. For the government, the narrative is one of accountability: no leader, however senior, is above the law. For Machar, the charges are part of a "political witch-hunt" intended to dismantle the 2018 peace deal and exclude him from future governance (AP, 2025). For citizens and observers, the trial reflects both the fragility of South Sudanese institutions and the enduring entanglement of law with politics.

The outcome of Machar's prosecution will shape more than his personal fate. If handled transparently and fairly, it could mark a step toward genuine accountability in South Sudan's violent politics. If manipulated for political ends, it risks reigniting ethnic mobilization, undermining the peace agreement, and pushing the country back toward civil war.

Ethnic Politics and the White Army Militia

The White Army is one of South Sudan's most infamous militias, emblematic of how ethnic mobilization has driven cycles of violence in the country's fragile history. Emerging in the 1990s as a loose coalition of armed Nuer youth, the White Army originally functioned as a community defense force protecting cattle, villages, and local autonomy against external raiders (Johnson,

2016). Its members were typically young, unmarried men who painted themselves with white ash for ritual and protection, giving the group its distinctive name (Pendle, 2015). Over time, however, the White Army transformed from a localized defense organization into an armed actor deeply entangled in national power struggles, particularly through its association with Riek Machar and the broader Nuer cause.

Origins and Composition

The White Army lacks a rigid command structure; it operates as a decentralized and often amorphous coalition of Nuer youth groups; its loose organization reflects both its resilience and volatility: local grievances and communal ties drive mobilization, making the militia responsive to immediate threats but difficult to control or disarm (Small Arms Survey, 2017). This decentralization also allows political elites, such as Machar, to tacitly align with or claim influence over the White Army without necessarily exercising direct command responsibility (Rolandsen, 2015). During the Second Sudanese Civil War, Machar's 1991 Nasir faction of the SPLM/A drew heavily on White Army fighters in clashes against John Garang's forces. This alliance culminated in atrocities such as the Bor massacre, where Nuer fighters killed thousands of Dinka civilians, an episode that entrenched ethnic mistrust between Dinka and Nuer communities (Johnson, 2016).

Role in the Civil War (2013–2018)

The outbreak of civil war in December 2013 reignited White Army mobilization. When Kiir accused Machar of plotting a coup, clashes in Juba quickly escalated into ethnic killings of Nuer civilians, prompting White Army militias to mobilize in Unity and Jonglei States in defense of their communities and in support of Machar's SPLM-IO faction (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Their operations were characterised by extreme violence, including mass killings, cattle raiding, and destruction of villages, which contributed to the humanitarian catastrophe that killed an estimated 400,000 people (Checchi et al., 2018).

The White Army's role during this period illustrated the double-edged nature of ethnic militias: while they provided local protection, they also extended the scope and intensity of civil war. Their violence was not only retaliatory but also instrumental in reshaping control over territory, resources, and political leverage in peace negotiations (ICG, 2014).

Current Resurgence and the 2025 Crisis

The March 2025 attack in Nasir, where White Army fighters overran a government base and killed more than 250 soldiers and a general, alongside the fatal shooting of a UN helicopter pilot, demonstrated the militia's enduring potency (Reuters, 2025). The government immediately linked the attack to Machar, framing it as evidence of his complicity in atrocities and as justification for treason and murder charges (Al Jazeera, 2025).

While Machar's direct command role remains contested, the incident underscores how the White Army continues to operate as both a communal force and a proxy in national power struggles. Its mobilisation illustrates the fragility of the 2018 peace agreement, where disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) efforts were never fully implemented (ICG, 2019). As a result, the White Army persists as a latent threat, easily reactivated during political crises.

Ethnic Divides and Cycles of Violence

At the core of the White Army phenomenon is South Sudan's entrenched ethnic divide. The conflict between Kiir and Machar maps onto broader community identities: Kiir is Dinka, the country's largest ethnic group, while Machar is Nuer, the second largest. Political elites have repeatedly mobilised ethnic loyalties to reinforce

their legitimacy, framing conflicts not only as struggles for power but also as existential battles for community survival (de Waal, 2014). This ethnic framing fuels cycles of violence. Attacks by one group prompt retaliatory mobilisation by the other, entrenching intercommunal grievances and undermining efforts at reconciliation. The White Army embodies this dynamic: its fighters perceive themselves as defenders of Nuer identity and autonomy, but in practice, their actions often escalate national-level conflict and deepen mistrust with Dinka communities (Pendle, 2015).

Implications for State Cohesion and Nation-Building

The persistence of the White Army highlights the central challenge of nation-building in South Sudan: the absence of a cohesive national identity and a monopoly on violence by the state. Militias like the White Army thrive in contexts where the state is seen as partisan, militarised, and aligned with specific ethnic constituencies rather than as a neutral arbiter (Rolandsen, 2015). This undermines state legitimacy and weakens cohesion, as citizens rely on ethnic militias rather than state institutions for security.

Additionally, the use of militias as bargaining chips in elite negotiations perpetuates a cycle of violence-for-political-leverage. The 2018 peace deal, while halting open conflict, failed to address these underlying dynamics. Without substantive reforms to security institutions, inclusive governance, and community-level reconciliation, ethnic militias remain both a symptom and a driver of South Sudan's instability (ICG, 2019).

In the long term, dismantling the White Army and other ethnic militias will require more than disarmament; it will require building a political order where citizens feel represented beyond ethnic lines, and where the state can provide security without relying on or competing with communal armed groups. Until then, the cowboy hat of Salva Kiir and the mobilised youth of the White Army will remain potent symbols of South Sudan's fragile statehood.

Regional and International Dimensions

The indictment of Riek Machar in September 2025 has reverberated far beyond South Sudan's borders, underlining how developments in Juba are never confined to national politics. The reactions of regional and international actors — from the United Nations (UN) and

IGAD, the regional bloc that mediated the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) and the 2018 R-ARCSS, faces renewed pressure to re-engage. Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan — as guarantors of the peace deal — have urged calm, though their competing interests complicate coordinated action



Jikany Nuer 'White Army' fighters hold their weapons in Upper Nile State, South Sudan (Photo Credit: REUTERS)

African Union (AU) to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and neighboring states highlight the broader stakes for stability, humanitarian conditions, and security in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region.

Reactions from Multilateral Bodies

The United Nations expressed concern that the charges against Machar risk undermining the fragile Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), which has been deployed since 2011, reiterated calls for adherence to the peace deal and urged both Kiir and Machar's camps to avoid actions that could trigger violence (UNMISS, 2025). The UN Security Council remains divided, however: while Western states emphasize accountability for atrocities, others, notably Russia and China, stress sovereignty and non-interference, reflecting broader geopolitical cleavages (UN Security Council, 2023).

The African Union, through its Peace and Security Council, has also called for restraint. It has framed the Machar indictment as a potential "peace spoiler" that could unravel years of mediation efforts. The AU has historically sought to balance its principles of sovereignty and non-indifference, backing accountability mechanisms such

as the proposed Hybrid Court for South Sudan, though progress on operationalizing this court has stalled due to government resistance (AU Commission, 2020).

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The Role of Neighboring States

Neighboring countries have historically played outsized roles in South Sudanese conflicts, often acting as both mediators and stakeholders. Ethiopia, hosting IGAD's headquarters, has facilitated numerous peace talks, but its domestic instability since the Tigray conflict has reduced its bandwidth for sustained engagement (Lyons, 2021). Kenya has maintained diplomatic involvement and economic interests, particularly through infrastructure and banking sectors, but faces credibility questions given allegations of partisan mediation in the past (Branch & Mampilly, 2015). Uganda, under President Yoweri Museveni, has been one of Kiir's strongest military and political backers, intervening directly in 2013 to prevent Juba's fall to Machar's forces (Rolandsen, 2015). Kampala's

continued alignment with Kiir complicates perceptions of neutrality in regional mediation.

Sudan remains another pivotal actor. Historically, Khartoum has oscillated between supporting Kiir and Machar, depending on its interests in oil revenues and border security (Johnson, 2016). The 2018 peace deal was co-guaranteed by Sudan, but the outbreak of Sudan's own civil conflict in 2023 has weakened its ability to influence developments in Juba (de Waal, 2023). The result is a mediation vacuum that makes a relapse into full-scale conflict in South Sudan more dangerous for regional stability.

Regional and Continental Security Implications

A renewed civil war in South Sudan would have destabilizing consequences across the Horn and Great Lakes regions. First, it would generate refugee flows into Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya, all of which already host large displaced populations. Uganda alone hosts over 1.5 million South Sudanese refugees, the largest number globally (UNHCR, 2023). A fresh exodus would strain humanitarian capacities, exacerbate tensions with host communities, and risk regional spillovers.

Second, renewed conflict could further destabilize borderlands that are already volatile. South Sudan's porous frontiers intersect with armed group activity in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Sudan, and Ethiopia. Cycles of cross-border cattle raiding, arms flows, and militia mobilization risk feeding broader insecurity in the Great Lakes region (Small Arms Survey, 2017).

Finally, instability in South Sudan undermines broader continental initiatives for peace and integration. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and regional infrastructure projects such as the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor depend on a stable South Sudanese state. Renewed conflict would derail these ambitions, reinforcing the perception of the Horn as a conflict-prone sub-region (AU Commission, 2020).

Humanitarian Concerns

The humanitarian implications of South Sudan's instability remain acute. Even before the 2025 crisis, 9 million South Sudanese, nearly three-quarters of the population required humanitarian assistance, and 7.5 million faced severe food insecurity (OCHA, 2024). Displacement

remains one of the most visible outcomes: over 2.3 million South Sudanese are refugees, while 2 million remain internally displaced (UNHCR, 2023). The March 2025 White Army attack worsened humanitarian access in Upper Nile State, where aid convoys have been targeted and air operations disrupted (Reuters, 2025).

For humanitarian agencies, the indictment of Machar is less a matter of legal justice than of operational risk. If the charges fuel renewed ethnic mobilization and conflict, aid corridors could collapse, compounding famine risk and disease outbreaks. International donors face the dilemma of supporting peace implementation while avoiding entanglement in South Sudan's internal power struggles.

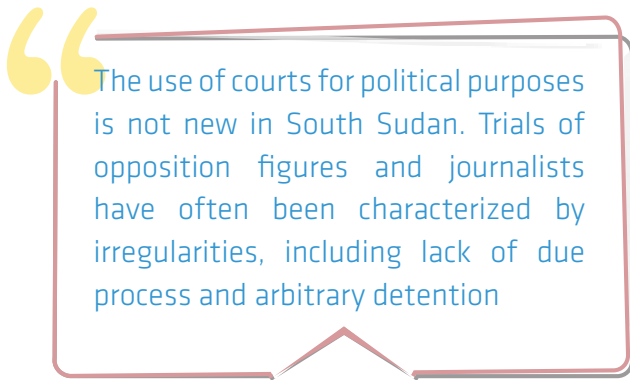
The regional and international dimensions of Machar's indictment underscore the stakes of South Sudan's crisis. For the UN, AU, and IGAD, the danger is that a fragile peace process could unravel, unleashing a new wave of violence and displacement. For neighboring states, instability in South Sudan threatens their own security and economic interests. The 2025 crisis demonstrates that South Sudan remains a linchpin in the Horn and Great Lakes: its peace or war reverberates far beyond its borders.

Governance, Justice, and the Fragility of Institutions

South Sudan's governance crisis is epitomized in the indictment of Riek Machar, which not only raises questions of political rivalry but also highlights the weakness of the country's justice system and institutions. Since independence in 2011, South Sudan has struggled to consolidate a judiciary and broader governance framework that operates independently of political elites. The reliance on courts as instruments of power has exposed the fragility of institutions that should otherwise serve as arbiters of justice and vehicles of reconciliation.

Weak Judiciary and Questions of Independence

The South Sudanese judiciary remains one of the weakest in Africa. Decades of conflict undermined legal infrastructure, leaving courts underfunded, understaffed, and susceptible to manipulation (Mennen, 2016). Judges and prosecutors often lack adequate training, and there is limited jurisprudence to guide decisions. While the Transitional Constitution enshrines judicial independence, in practice the executive has consistently



The use of courts for political purposes is not new in South Sudan. Trials of opposition figures and journalists have often been characterized by irregularities, including lack of due process and arbitrary detention

interfered in judicial appointments and case management (Awolich, 2019).

The indictment of Machar in 2025 fits into this pattern. Critics argue that the charges of treason, murder, and crimes against humanity were pursued not through an impartial legal process but through directives from the executive (Al Jazeera, 2025). This shows how South Sudan's judiciary struggles to act as a neutral forum, especially when political stakes are high.

Politicization of Courts as Tools of Power

The use of courts for political purposes is not new in South Sudan. Trials of opposition figures and journalists have often been characterized by irregularities, including lack of due process and arbitrary detention (Amnesty International, 2017). Machar's trial exemplifies how the judiciary can be mobilized to consolidate executive authority rather than to deliver justice. This politicization undermines public trust in the judiciary. For many citizens, courts are seen less as protectors of rights and more as extensions of elite power struggles (Rolandsen, 2015). Such perceptions reinforce cycles of violence, as communities resort to militias or customary courts rather than state institutions to resolve disputes (Pendle, 2018).

Broader Governance Challenges

Beyond the judiciary, governance in South Sudan has been marked by entrenched corruption, lack of accountability, and elite-driven politics. Oil revenues, which account for over 90 percent of government revenue, have been endemically mismanaged, with billions lost to illicit financial flows (Global Witness, 2015). Political elites, drawn primarily from the Dinka and Nuer, have used state resources to maintain patronage networks while neglecting service delivery (de Waal, 2014).

The reliance on ethnically based patronage undermines national cohesion and perpetuates exclusion. As a result, South Sudan has consistently ranked among the world's most fragile states, with weak institutional capacity and little ability to deliver basic governance functions (Fund for Peace, 2023). The Machar case, far from advancing justice, risks entrenching these patterns by prioritizing elite rivalries over inclusive governance.

Political Trials vs. Reconciliation Mechanisms

The reliance on political trials in South Sudan contrasts with the peacebuilding frameworks envisioned in the 2015 ARCSS and 2018 R-ARCSS. Both agreements called for transitional justice mechanisms, including a Truth, Reconciliation and Healing Commission and a Hybrid Court for South Sudan (African Union Commission, 2020). Yet these initiatives remain largely stalled, as elites resist accountability mechanisms that could implicate themselves. Instead of reconciliation, political trials have become substitutes for dialogue. This is dangerous in a post-conflict state, as it risks reigniting violence. The absence of credible transitional justice leaves victims without redress and communities without healing, perpetuating grievances that fuel cycles of revenge.

Lessons from Other Post-Conflict States

Comparative experiences across the Horn and Great Lakes regions illustrate both the risks and opportunities for South Sudan. In Sudan, political trials of opposition figures under Omar al-Bashir delegitimized state institutions and entrenched authoritarianism, contributing to eventual regime collapse (Young, 2019). In Ethiopia, the post-1991 government relied heavily on courts to try Derg officials, but without broader reconciliation mechanisms, ethnic grievances continued to fester, culminating in the Tigray conflict (Lyons, 2021).

In Somalia, the absence of functioning judicial institutions created a vacuum filled by clan-based courts and extremist groups such as al-Shabaab (Hansen, 2019). These examples highlight that political trials without institutional reform or reconciliation processes are unlikely to produce sustainable peace. For South Sudan, the lesson is clear: pursuing Machar through politicized courts risks entrenching divisions rather than building legitimacy.

The charges against Riek Machar must be understood not only as a political episode but as a reflection of South Sudan's fragile governance and justice systems. The weak judiciary, politicized trials, and elite-driven governance point to deeper institutional deficits. Unless South Sudan prioritizes strengthening its judiciary, implementing transitional justice mechanisms, and curbing corruption, political trials will remain tools of power rather than vehicles of accountability. Lessons from Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia reinforce that without institutional reform, justice becomes another casualty of elite competition.

Conclusion: The Burden of a Wounded Nation

The image of Salva Kiir's black cowboy hat, once a gift from a U.S. president and now a defining emblem of leadership, encapsulates both the promise and the peril of South Sudanese politics. As a symbol, it represents authority, continuity, and national identity. Yet, juxtaposed against the country's persistent instability, ethnic divisions, and recurrent violence, the hat also signifies the heavy burden of leadership in a deeply wounded nation. It is an icon of power that cannot, on its own, heal fractures in governance, reconcile rival communities, or shield civilians from the consequences of elite competition.

For ordinary South Sudanese, the stakes are immediate and severe. Political rivalries, attacks, and the ongoing

stalemate in Juba manifest as disrupted lives, destroyed homes, displacement, and humanitarian insecurity. Years of civil war and political maneuvering have entrenched cycles of mistrust, leaving citizens bearing the human and economic costs of decisions made in elite corridors. From internally displaced persons to refugees across neighboring countries, the people of South Sudan continue to endure the consequences of a political culture in which symbolic authority often outweighs institutional accountability.

South Sudan now stands at a crossroads. On one path lies the possibility of renewed conflict, ethnic mobilization, and further fracturing of state authority. On the other lies the opportunity for reconciliation, strengthened institutions, and inclusive governance that prioritizes the welfare of citizens over the consolidation of personal power or symbolic authority. Achieving this requires a deliberate effort to rebuild trust, enforce the rule of law, and honor commitments under the peace agreements. True nation-building demands more than symbols; it requires functional institutions, a commitment to justice, and leadership willing to place citizens above personal or partisan interests. Only by prioritizing the well-being of the population over the projection of power can South Sudan begin to lift the weight of its wounds and move toward a stable, unified future.

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Corruption, an Ignored Threat to Security in the Horn of Africa

By Fridah Njoki

Abstract

Conventional security analyses frequently overlook the foundational role of corruption, a pervasive threat that operates in the shadows of governance. Using secondary data, this paper contends that corruption constitutes the most significant threat to regional security in the Horn of Africa. It argues that the region's chronic instability- from state collapse in Somalia and protracted conflicts in Sudan and South Sudan to the institutional decay within the governments of Kenya and Uganda- is not merely coincidental to graft but is fundamentally fuelled by it. From the nepotistic hiring of security personnel, issuance of identity cards in border towns to the corrupt awarding of defence contracts, bribery ensures that the state's very architecture is compromised from within undermining a state's ability to counter security threats. By examining how illicit financial flows, kleptocracy, and everyday erode state legitimacy, enable terrorism, and compromise border integrity, this study demonstrates that corruption is not a peripheral issue but a central catalyst driving the Horn's security crisis.

Introduction

Corruption, often perceived as a shadowy tax on economic growth or a mere ethical failing, transcends its financial and moral dimensions to emerge as a profound and multifaceted threat to national security. It operates as a corrosive agent, systematically weakening the very institutions designed to protect a state and its citizens from harm. By eroding public trust, hollowing out governance structures, and diverting essential resources, corruption creates a fertile ground for instability, fuels social unrest, and empowers a spectrum of threats from organised crime to terrorism. Ultimately, it undermines the foundation of secure and just society, making it not a just a crime of greed, but a direct assault on the safety and well-being of the populace.

Corruption is fundamentally defined as the misuse of entrusted power for private gain, or dishonest and fraudulent conduct by those in positions of authority, tracing its origin to Latin words suggesting destruction or debasement (Mohammed et al,2023). In the public sector, corruption is the abuse of authority by official for personal gains in discharging their duties, or the use of granted official powers or related opportunities to obtain unlawful benefits for oneself or others, or the offer of such benefits to influence an official's illegal use of power. Corruption manifests in various forms including the promise, offering,

or giving of undue advantage to a public official, or the official soliciting or accepting such advantage, in order for the official to act or refrain from acting in their official duties (UNODC, 2004). It encompasses specific acts such as bribery, extortion, embezzlement, money laundering, tax evasion, electoral fraud, favouritism, and nepotism (Ladan-Baki, 2014). It can also appear as grand corruption at high government levels or petty corruption involving small, routine payments for public services (Abdullahi et al, 2023).

The Horn of Africa (HoA), generally comprising Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya and Sudan, is historically one of the most volatile and conflict-ridden regions in Africa, marked by political instability, violence, repression and human rights violation (Adeto, 2019). Adeto (2019) argues that the primary security challenge stems from the critical nexus between state fragility and conflict dynamics. State fragility refers to the weakness of state institutions to provide functional authority, political legitimacy, and basic security and social needs for citizens. This internal weakness fuels corruption, maladministration, nepotism, and undemocratic practices. Conflict dynamics manifests as state-centred civil wars, insurgencies, and violence, driven by the politicization of ethnic and identity lines.

Key examples include the protracted conflicts in South Sudan, the long period of state collapse in Somalia, and the widespread inter-ethnic violence in Ethiopia following the adoption of ethnic-based federalism (Baweke, 2015). This environment generates severe negative security externalities, including the pervasive threat of the Al-Shabaab terrorist group, massive refugees' flows and internally displaced persons (IDPS) as well as transitional organized crimes and the flow of small arms and light weapons (Nzau, 2023).

The geopolitical importance of the Horn of Africa further complicates its security due to its location along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which are vital maritime trade routes connecting Asia, the Middle East and Europe. This strategic positioning has made the HoA a centre of contestation, leading to a military base race along the coasts of Djibouti and Somalia, involving extra-regional security actors such as China, the US, NATO, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The substantial flow of foreign funds from investments and rents derived from these bases, grants external actors considerable political and economic weight, sometimes resulting in local leaders

exhibiting greater loyalty to foreign states than their own states.

Furthermore, the security landscape is heavily influenced by neighbouring Regional Security Complexes (RSCs), particularly the Middle East/ Gulf RSC. The region acts as an extension of the battlefield for proxy wars, such as the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which uses financial capacity and commercial deals to secure allies and exert influence contributing to instability and refugee flows from Yemen. Finally, the dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt over the recently launched Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) poses a security dilemma (Adeto, 2019). Maluki and Njoki, 2024 bring in the severe maritime security challenges primarily piracy as a critical issue off the coast of Somalia, threatening commerce through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. The security threats are worsened by regional conflicts as extremist groups like Al-Shabaab exploit lawless coastal areas in Somalia, maintaining a protracted security problem. Further, regional instability is heightened by external rivalries, including Houthi attacks targeting commercial shipping from conflict zones like Yemen, contributing overall



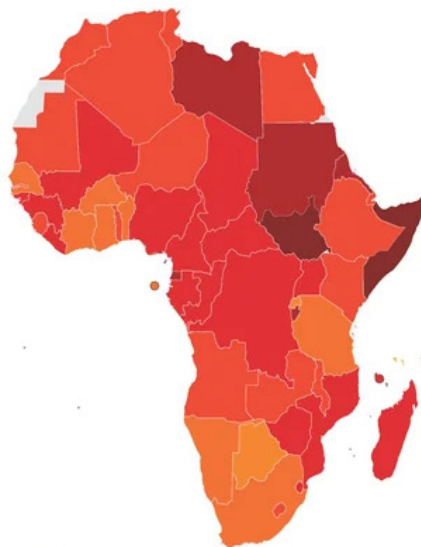
The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a global shipping route through the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden (Map: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc)

CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS INDEX 2024

AFRICAN UNION

32/100

AVERAGE SCORE

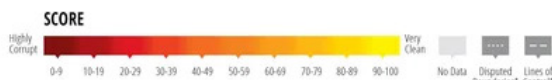


SCORE COUNTRY/TERRITORY

| | |
|----|-----------------------|
| 72 | Seychelles |
| 62 | Cabo Verde |
| 57 | Botswana |
| 57 | Rwanda |
| 51 | Mauritius |
| 49 | Namibia |
| 45 | Benin |
| 45 | Côte d'Ivoire |
| 45 | Sao Tome and Principe |
| 45 | Senegal |
| 42 | Ghana |
| 41 | Burkina Faso |
| 41 | South Africa |
| 41 | Tanzania |
| 39 | Tunisia |
| 39 | Zambia |
| 38 | Gambia |
| 37 | Ethiopia |

| | |
|----|--------------|
| 37 | Lesotho |
| 37 | Morocco |
| 34 | Algeria |
| 34 | Malawi |
| 34 | Niger |
| 33 | Sierra Leone |
| 32 | Angola |
| 32 | Kenya |
| 32 | Togo |
| 31 | Djibouti |
| 30 | Egypt |
| 30 | Mauritania |
| 28 | Guinea |
| 27 | Eswatini |
| 27 | Gabon |
| 27 | Liberia |
| 27 | Mali |
| 26 | Cameroon |
| 26 | Madagascar |
| 26 | Nigeria |

| | |
|----|----------------------------------|
| 26 | Uganda |
| 25 | Mozambique |
| 24 | Central African Republic |
| 23 | Congo |
| 21 | Chad |
| 21 | Comoros |
| 21 | Guinea-Bissau |
| 21 | Zimbabwe |
| 20 | Democratic Republic of the Congo |
| 17 | Burundi |
| 15 | Sudan |
| 13 | Equatorial Guinea |
| 13 | Eritrea |
| 13 | Libya |
| 9 | Somalia |
| 8 | South Sudan |



*The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map follow the UN practice to the best of our knowledge as of January 2025. They do not imply the expression of any opinion on the part of Transparency International concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities or concerning the delimitation of its borders or boundaries.

#CPI2024

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Transparency International Corruption Index sites the Horn of Africa countries as the most corrupt (Source: Transparency International, 2025)

turbulence and fuelling a concentration of foreign military bases in the coastal areas.

Methodology

This study is grounded on qualitative analysis of a wide array of secondary data, which forms the evidentiary bases of its argument. The research methods involve systematic review and synthesis of existing scholarly work, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles and news items. The study also draws upon government policy papers, official reports from the World Bank and United Nations, and audits from oversight institutions. The news media survey captures the real-time dynamics and on the ground realities of how corruption fuels insecurity. The triangulation of these sources allows the study to construct a comprehensive and compelling case., thereby validating the central thesis that corruption is the principal threat to regional security in the Horn of Africa.

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on the securitization theory as proposed by the Copenhagen School of thought. Barry Buzan and Ole Waever challenges the traditional state-centric narrow view of security by arguing that the referent object of security can be anything including the state, individuals, economy, the environment among others and that through a speech act, any issue including corruption can be recognised as an existential threat

(Buzan et al, 1998). The theory has four core processes including identification of an existential threat, a speech act by a securitizing actor, justification of the use of extraordinary measures to deal with the threat and audience acceptance. This process moves an issue from normal to emergency level where resources are redirected to deal with the threat to the referent object of security.

The study argues that corruption is an existential threat to the state and therefore, there is need for concerted efforts to deal with the menace. Corruption undermines the state's monopoly on force by allowing cartels, warlords and oligarchs to form and operate with a sovereign territory therefore fragmenting state authority; it erodes political legitimacy and public trust destroying the social contract between government and the people leading to loss of faith in state institutions, making them predatory instead of protective. Lack of political legitimacy and public trust can lead to unrest, mass protests, and create a vacuum that extremists may fill to the detriment of the state and the public. Corruption also weakens the economy, facilitates organised crime and weakens national defense. Therefore, anti-corruption measures in the HoA are a matter of urgency given the fragility of the region.

However, the act of securitization itself is a double-edged sword. While it can mobilize resources and political will,

it can also open the door to authoritarian practices. Nevertheless, democracies must find a balance that treats corruption with the seriousness it deserves but also resists the urge to abandon the rule of law.

Corruption and Insecurity: Literature review

Corruption is identified as fundamental, systematic threat that impacts security across various dimensions, including national, public, political and human security often acquiring a pervasive and cross-cutting character (Moiseev et al, 2018). United Nations Convention Against Corruption recognised the corrosive nature of corruption in society. Kofi Annan (2024) said that 'corruption is an insidious plague that has a wide range of corrosive effects on societies. It undermines democracy and the rule of law, leads to violations of human rights, distorts markets, erodes the quality of life and allows organized crime, terrorism and other threats to human security to flourish'. States have time and again declared corruption as a security threat. In 2021, President Biden of the US declared a Strategy on Countering Corruption aimed at modernizing US government anti-corruption efforts, curb illicit finance and hold the corrupt accountable. The strategy was updated in 2025 in the National Security Enforcement Strategy, to reflects the evolving geopolitical landscape and the use of corruption by adversarial states and transitional organizations to undermine U.S interest.

Australia has the National Strategy to Fight Transnational Serious and Organized Crime (2018) and the Foreign bribery enforcement department within the Australian Federal Police (AFP) to focus on grand corruption and foreign bribery. Germany national security strategy (2023) recognizes the challenges presented by corruption and Russia's national security strategies until 2020 named corruption as one of the main threats to state and public security. Regional bodies also have strategies to deal with corruption. NATO' Strategic Concept (2022) views corruption as a destructive factor that undermines governance, fuels instability and can be used as a tool foreign policy by authoritarian governments. Similarly, European Union's Internal Security Strategy in Action (2010) EU Strategy to Tackle Organised Crime 2011-2025 and the European Security Strategy (2025) identified corruption as a tool for international criminal networks to penetrate member states economies and erode public trust.

In Africa, AU's Agenda 2063 addresses corruption as a threat to security and a barrier to development. It recognizes that corruption in sectors such as security institutions can exacerbate conflict and hinder sustainable peace and development. The African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption was adopted in July, 2003 and come into force in August, 2006. The treaty provides a framework for member states to enact anti-corruption laws in both public and private sectors. Within the HoA, Kenya's annual report on the state of national security (2024) lists corruption as a significant threat to Kenya's national security. The report explicitly describes corruption, alongside organised crimes like money laundering and terrorism financing as negatively affecting the country's economic development and diverts resources from essential services.

The phenomenon is multifaceted and complex, impacting governance and the general wellbeing of society (Ladan-Baki, 2014). Corruption operates not merely as an economic drain but as a profound structural obstacle, hindering the normal functioning of all social mechanisms and seriously obstructing the development of the economy, the administration of justice, and the construction of a state of law (Moiseev et al, 2018). Furthermore, its existence contributes to political instability and the effectiveness of government institutions, underscoring the view that's security encompasses not only national defense but also economic, social, and political conditions free from fear and risk (Tymosheko, 2022).

The presence of corruption significantly destabilizes the political environment and erodes public confidence in the state's capacity to govern and protect its citizens (Tymosheko, 2022). When state officials and enforcement agencies are involved in bribery, it undermines the people's belief in the state's ability to protect their rights and freedoms, thereby increasing social tensions and

“The Horn of Africa (HoA), generally comprising Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya and Sudan, is historically one of the most volatile and conflict-ridden regions in Africa

A common problem across almost all states of the Horn is the tendency of neo-patrimonial practice and clientelism. Misrule and neo-patrimonial practices are features of Ethiopia governance, while in Somalia both petty and grand forms of corruption are prevalent, permeating key sectors like ports, airports, tax, customs

threatening political stability. Corruption reduces the authority of government and public administration in the eyes of the populace. Critically, there is an inverse relationship between corruption and human rights and freedom. The greater the scale of corruption, the less the ability people have to realize their rights and freedoms (Moiseev et al, 2018). In corrupt states, the necessary elements of decent leadership and trust required to navigate times of uncertainty are severely compromised. The resulting weakness of state authority, effectiveness, and legitimacy can lead to the formation of 'ungovernable spaces', that non-state actors exploit, further complicating security dynamics.

A major pathway through which corruption impacts security is by fuelling conflicts, poverty, and organised crime. Corruption, whether grand or petty, involves the siphoning or misappropriation of public funds meant for developmental projects and welfare programs. This practice aggravates poverty by negatively affecting economic growth and reducing the quality of public service delivery in essential areas like health and education (Mohammed et al, 2023). The subsequent creation of mass poverty, frustration, and danger transforms into security challenges, as poverty and insecurity are considered inseparable. Frustrated and unemployed youths become susceptible to recruitment into various criminal activities and armed groups posing serious threats to peace and stability. Moreover, almost all transnational threats, including terrorism, human trafficking, and arms trafficking, are fundamentally linked to corruption, without which their operations would be impossible (Adeto, 2019).

Corruption within the defense and security sectors poses an especially grave threat to national integrity and operational effectiveness. Corruption among high-ranking military and security officials can involve procurement fraud, contract inflation, the purchase of substandard equipment, and the looting of funds. These actions have direct consequences on frontline security,

they lead to non-payment of duty allowances, prevent the acquisition of necessary military equipment, and severely undermine the morale and the performance of troops in the field, making it difficult or impossible to successfully execute operations against armed groups. In severe contexts, such as under martial law, corruption including the sale of military equipment parts or humanitarian aid to an aggressor country, equates to working for the aggressor and poses an immediate threat to human life and rights (Mohammed et al, 2023).

Beyond domestic instability, modern corruption is a transnational phenomenon, which can be weaponized in pursuit of national goals in a concept known as 'strategic corruption'. This mechanism involves actions that compromise the political and defense capabilities of target countries. (Huss and Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2022). Examples include using the 'revolving door' to place prominent politicians in high-level positions in foreign strategic companies to lobby for national interests; illegitimately financing foreign political parties to undermine a nation's capacity to act decisively by imposing sanctions; and facilitating money laundering, which affords disproportionate privileges to foreign elites, thereby fostering resentment in the host country (Huss and Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2022). Strategic corruption weakens the national security architecture of targeted countries by creating financial dependencies on the will of the foreign power, thus increasing the cost and fragmentation of any necessary response to international conflicts (Huss and Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2022).

Manifestation of the impact of Corruption on HoA security

The HoA states continue to score poorly in the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI) reflecting high perceived levels of public sector corruption. The CPI ranks 180 countries and territories on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Table 1 shows various HOA countries CPI score as per the TI CPI 2024 report.

Table: 1 Select HOA states CPI Scores

| Country/Territory | CPI 2024 Score | Implied Ranking Context (out of 180) |
|--------------------|----------------|--|
| South Sudan | 8 | Ranks 180th , the last spot globally. |
| Somalia | 9 | Ranks 179th , among the lowest scorers globally. |
| Eritrea | 13 | Among the lowest scorers globally, alongside Libya and Yemen. |
| Sudan | 15 | Among the lowest scorers globally, reflecting countries experiencing conflict. |
| Uganda | 26 | Shares this score with Cameroon, Iraq, Madagascar, Mexico, and Nigeria. |
| Djibouti | 31 | Ranks 131st globally. |
| Kenya | 32 | Shares this score with Angola, Ecuador, Sri Lanka, Togo, and Uzbekistan. |
| Ethiopia | 37 | Ranks 108th globally. |

Countries near the bottom of global corruption indices such as Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan have experience recent violent conflicts and rank highly among the world's most fragile states (Adeto, 2019). Somalia is characterized by rampant corruption and a deeply patronage system, scored 9 out of 100 on the 2019 CPI, ranking 180th out of 180th countries, in 2024, it was ranked 179th showing very minute improvement.

A common problem across almost all states of the Horn is the tendency of neo-patrimonial practice and clientelism. Misrule and neo-patrimonial practices are features of Ethiopia governance (Cheru, 2023), while in Somalia both petty and grand forms of corruption are prevalent, permeating key sectors like ports, airports, tax, customs, immigration, and telecommunications. (Chene, 2012). In Sudan, corruption and misrule contributed to the mass uprising that resulted in the downfall of President Omar Al –Bashir (Cheru, 2023). Additionally, the management of external aid is a major concern, particularly on fragile states like Somalia, where aid funds are a target for corrupt activity. In South Sudan, a UN report identified corruption as a hallmark of conflict, noting that millions of dollars have been looted from public coffers (Duri, 2020).

Corruption infiltrates the security forces, providing incentives for extortion and bribery. In Somali for instance, the corruption in the security sector has been described as 'systematic and organised' contributing to disorder and lawlessness (Duri, 2020).

Singapore: An example for HoA

Singapore has managed to implement a systematic anti-corruption model that had seen the country transform

from a poor nation into a global leader in combating corruption. In 2010, Singapore ranked third globally on the CPI sharing top ranks with Denmark (1st place) and New Zealand (2nd place). The CPI 2024, Denmark still leads with a score of 90, followed closely by Finland (88) and Singapore (84) with New Zealand scoring 83.

Singapore's success is attributed to several systematic measures including political will and the creation of an independent and powerful anti-corruption body. At independence, Singapore first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew demonstrated great leadership by refusing to receive gifts from well-wishers, whose motive was future favours. This set an example for the other public servants. (Nasong'o, 2020) The anti-corruption agency –Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau- has serious powers under the Corruption Prevention Act and the Corruption, Drug Trafficking, and Other Serious Crimes (Confiscation of Benefits) Acts (CDSA) including permission to detain potential bribe takers, conduct searches in their homes and work places, check bank accounts, and confiscate properties acquired through corruption and investigate any public official who is living beyond their means. The government also increased civil servants including police and judicial officers' remuneration to reduce temptation and removing the need to take bribes (Moiseev et al, 2018).

With these reforms, Singapore ensured that there was strict enforcement and accountability mechanisms. Investigations were carried out even against close relatives of political leaders including the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Many including ministers were convicted, sentenced to imprisonment, while others committed

suicide or fled the country. Decision making procedures were also simplified, removed ambiguity in the laws replacing them with clear and simple rules that lead to the cancellation of permits and licensing requirements. This essentially removed the opportunity of bureaucratic bribe-takers (Moiseev et al, 2018). The country also embraced the use of technology and many government services are offered on e-service from the comfort of Singaporean homes. This minimizes the bureaucracy interactions with the public and improves efficacy. Singapore has managed to reduce both the opportunities and the incentives for corruption during due to political will, and leaders setting an example on how a progressive society should behave (Nasong'o, 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, corruption has been deeply ingrained in the governance structure of states in the HoA creating one more layer of insecurity and threat to peace and security in the region. State fragility, porous borders, weak institutional mechanism, lack of political will and external interference are contributors to the pervasive

nature of corruption in the region. Nevertheless, the fight against corruption can be won as demonstrated by the case of Singapore, that leaders can set good examples that can have positive repercussions across all governance structures. HoA heads of states must lead by example, while countries like Kenya have implemented a fairly robust anti-corruption measures, the fight against corruption is still far from being won due to institutional weaknesses and lack of independence of the anti-corruption bodies. HoA security challenges cannot be sorted out until the correct systems for accountability and enforcement are set up, supported and respected. Therefore, it is imperative that the region creates a culture of peace, respect for the law and institutions.

Corruption is a social ill with devastating impacts on the HoA security. The fight against corruption requires political will from all leaders. Often times, prosecution of corruption cases is dependent on political patronage. Therefore, the study makes the following recommendation

- ❑ Stabilize HoA states by restoring peace and security in conflicting states, embrace free and fair elections,



Riot police officers disperse Kenyans protesting against the government's failure to take action against corruption, on March 27, 2023. (Photo Credits: REUTERS/John Muchucha)

Corruption is a social ill with devastating impacts on the HoA security. The fight against corruption requires political will from all leaders. Often times, prosecution of corruption cases is dependent on political patronage

and ensure that there is peaceful transfer of power within the region.

- ❑ The heads of states must demonstrate political will and strictly enforce anti-corruption legislation.

Leaders must go beyond rhetoric and lead by personal example.

- ❑ Minimize the socio-economic conditions that breed corruption by strengthening the social function of the state, eliminating unemployment and poverty, and striving for real legal equality and social justice
- ❑ Establish independent anti-corruption bodies. Independence of these institutions should be financial, ability to make decisions on their leadership and well resourced. The existing ones unfortunately are used to settle political scores therefore eroding public trust.
- ❑ Deploy smart technologies to make it easier to get government services, cut out middlemen and increase efficacy in service delivery.

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Climate, Conflict and Displacement in the Turkana-Omo Basin: Risks and Pathways to Resilience

By Samantha Nagaba

Abstract

The Turkana-Omo basin, extending across southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya, is becoming one of the Horn of Africa's most volatile climate-conflict frontiers. In February 2025, clashes over grazing and fishing rights left more than 30 people dead and displaced over 10,000, underscoring how climate stress is fueling cycles of violence. Prolonged droughts, erratic rainfall, and shrinking natural resources have turned traditional mobility into forced displacement, urban poverty, and cross-border insecurity. Women, youth, and marginalized groups are disproportionately affected, with growing risks of gender-based violence, recruitment into armed groups, and loss of cultural continuity. The circulation of small arms and weak governance structures magnify local disputes into recurring crises, while fragmented national and regional policies leave gaps in protection and resilience-building. Despite progress at the international level, including the 2025 International Court of Justice (ICJ) advisory opinion on states' climate obligations, communities in fragile borderlands remain in limbo. Addressing this ticking crisis requires the integration of adaptation and security planning, strengthening cross-border governance, controlling arms flows and embedding community-driven solutions that transform mobility into resilience rather than vulnerability.

Introduction

In February 2025, violent clashes in the Lake Turkana border region claimed more than 30 lives and displaced over 10,000 people in southern Ethiopia (ACLED, 2025). The clashes began over fishing and grazing rights but have escalated into a wider crisis, where climate-induced migration, shrinking resources and the circulation of small arms combine to fuel recurring violence. These tensions are far from isolated, instead reflecting a broader pattern of climate-linked conflict across the Horn of Africa.

The region ranks among the most climate-vulnerable globally. According to the 2023 ND-GAIN Country index, both Ethiopia and Kenya rank in the bottom tier for vulnerability, scoring 38.7 and 38.0, respectively, signaling severe exposure and limited adaptive capacity (ND-GAIN, 2023).

While the United Nations Security Council has begun recognizing climate change as a peace and security challenge by integrating climate considerations into mission mandates, efforts to pass thematic climate-security resolutions have stalled amid political resistance, including a veto in 2021 (Global Observatory, 2023)

(SIPRI, 2023). These developments suggest progress at the global level, yet, in fragile transboundary zones like the Turkana basin, instability and insecurity remain entrenched.

On the legal front, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an advisory opinion on July 23, 2025, affirming that all states have binding obligations, not merely aspirational commitments, to protect the climate system and environment under international law. The Court underscored that failure to act can constitute a breach of duty, potentially giving rise to reparations or legal accountability (International Court of Justice, 2025) translating of these commitments into practical changes and meaningful resilience building in hotspot areas like the Turkana-Omo basin remains elusive in these regions where communities face the immediate lived consequences of climate insecurity for example in Turkana's Kalokol areas, societies that once shred seasonal access to lake Turkana now report violence from confrontations seasonally due to receding water levels and contested fishing zones.



Miracle in the desert, fishermen preparing their nets before going out to fish in Impresa beach, Kalokol town (Photo Credit: International Alert)

In the Turkana-Omo River basin, pastoralist communities in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia are increasingly competing for shrinking pastures and water, while fishing communities grapple with receding water levels and declining fish levels (Climate Diplomacy, n.d.). These local disputes, often triggered by drought or livestock raids, are now exacerbated by climate variability and unregulated flows of small arms. This toxic feedback loop, where environmental stress fuels insecurity and undermines adaptive capacity, threatens to deepen the humanitarian and security crisis in the region.

The next section examines the climatic driver of these tensions and their repercussions for local livelihoods.

Climate Trends and Vulnerability

The understanding of how climate stress translates into conflict needs a close look at the transformations in the environment that reshape livelihoods in the basin. Southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya, particularly the Turkana-Omo basin, face mounting climatic pressures. Over the past two decades, the region has experienced more frequent and severe droughts, erratic rainfall, and rising temperatures (IPCC, 2022). Rainfall patterns that pastoralists historically relied upon to manage seasonal herd movements have become increasingly unpredictable, resulting in prolonged dry spells and occasional flash floods that disrupt grazing cycles. These

shifts place significant strain on livestock and human livelihoods, undermining traditional coping mechanisms (Opiyo et al., 2015). An example is in Northern Kenya's Loima sub-county where successive failed rains between 2021-2024 dried many seasonal rivers like Tarach forcing herders to trek over 90 kilometers in search of pasture, these herders found themselves crossing into Ethiopia lands thus triggering clashes.

Impact on Pastoralist Communities

The more climatic pressures intensify, the impacts on human lives become most visible among the herders and pastoralists, as well as the fishing communities who depend directly on natural resources for survival. Pastoralist livelihoods in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya are directly tied to climatic patterns. As droughts intensify and seasonal rains fail, water sources, pastureland, and grazing resources shrink (Aklilu & Wekesa, 2002; Gebreyes et al., 2022). For instance, herders in Turkana rely on boreholes established by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like VSF-Germany after their traditional wells dried up, and yet conflicts over these few boreholes or water points have become flashpoints of violence. Livestock mortality rises, forcing herders to undertake longer, riskier migrations in search of forage and water. In southern Omo's Nyangatom zone, pastoralists have reported losing up to 45 percent of their herds to the 2022-2023 drought, triggering retaliatory

“Rainfall patterns that pastoralists historically relied upon to manage seasonal herd movements have become increasingly unpredictable, resulting in prolonged dry spells and occasional flash floods that disrupt grazing cycles

raids over surviving livestock. Such movements often increase the likelihood of clashes over grazing access, particularly where crossing national borders complicates customary migration rights (Climate Diplomacy, n.d.). Shifting migration routes also drive pastoralists into unfamiliar or contested areas, heightening the risk of disputes with host communities. These altered movement patterns make conflict, not just environmental stress, a persistent reality, compounding insecurity and eroding resilience.

Pressures on Fishing Communities

Fishing communities around Lake Turkana, especially on the Ethiopian side, are equally vulnerable to climatic and environmental shocks. Reduced water inflows from the Omo River, worsened by upstream hydropower projects and deforestation, have lowered Lake Turkana's water levels (Climate Diplomacy, n.d.). This decline has sharply reduced fish levels, undermining food security and household income. In Todonyang, the local fishers report a more than 50 percent drop in the Nile perch catches as compared to 2015, and this is mainly due to the reduced inflows from the Omo River.

As fish yields become irregular and insufficient, some fishers encroach into contested resource zones or migrate in search of alternative livelihoods. This not only intensifies ecological pressure but also heightens the potential for resource-based conflict.

Migration and Displacement

The Turkana-Omo basin has long been a region of human mobility, with pastoralists, fishers, and agro-pastoralists moving seasonally in response to climatic variability. However, in recent decades, climate stress has transformed mobility from a traditional coping mechanism into a driver of vulnerability, conflict and mostly humanitarian crises. Migration patterns are

increasingly characterized by forced displacement, irregular cross-border movements and settlement in urban centers ill-prepared to absorb new arrivals. This shift shows how climate stress is transforming livelihoods and raising urgent questions about protection, governance, and regional stability.

Historically, migration served as an adaptive response to droughts or declining pastures, allowing pastoralists to redistribute pressure on fragile ecosystems (Opiyo et al., 2015). Today, however, migration increasingly takes place under conditions of duress rather than choice. Entire households are leaving herding or fishing not as part of seasonal cycles, but because their livelihoods have collapsed (Gebreyes, 2022). Such shifts alter the social fabric of communities: customary institutions that once regulated mobility are eroding, leaving gaps that exacerbate disputes over territory and access.

Unlike temporary herd movements, climate-driven migration is also reshaping demographic patterns. Increasing numbers of displaced households settled around small towns such as Lodwar, Kainuk, Jinka, or Omorate, where limited infrastructure quickly becomes overstretched. Informal settlements have emerged without adequate water, health, or education services, producing new forms of urban poverty. Instead of reducing vulnerability, displacement often entrenches it, creating fragile peripheries around towns already facing climate stress themselves.

The cross-border character of migration in the Turkana-Omo basin compounds the crisis as communities traditionally traverse the Kenya-Ethiopia border for grazing and fishing, but these routes are now sites of conflict and policing, or militarization. When clashes erupt, displaced households frequently cross into neighboring states in search of safety. Unlike refugees fleeing persecution or war, climate migrants fall outside the protection of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Their displacement is not recognized under international refugee law, leaving them in what scholars call a “protection gap” (New Security Beat, 2023).

This legal gap poses acute challenges; pastoralists displaced into southern Ethiopia after clashes in 2025 received little formal humanitarian assistance, as national authorities categorized them as “migrants” rather than “refugees.” Similarly, displaced Dassanech households moving into northern Kenya often find themselves

excluded from county-level services because they are not formally registered. The lack of harmonized legal frameworks across the border creates a fragmented response that leaves vulnerable populations without consistent protection.

Migration and displacement have uneven consequences across gender and age; Women and girls are disproportionately affected, as they bear the burden of securing food and water in new resource-scarce environments. In displacement settings, they face heightened risks of gender-based violence, including during firewood collection or in poorly secured shelters (Gebreyes, 2022). Access to maternal health services also diminishes in migration contexts, exacerbating vulnerabilities.

Youth face a different set of risks. With livestock losses reducing opportunities for traditional livelihoods, displaced young men are increasingly susceptible to recruitment into armed groups or cattle raiding as survival strategies. A cycle emerges where climate shocks displace youth into marginalization, and that marginalization feeds new rounds of insecurity. Addressing displacement requires attention not only to the immediate humanitarian needs of families but also to the long-term prospects of youth who might otherwise be drawn into cycles of violence.

The humanitarian system struggles to adapt to the fluid, cross-border nature of displacement. Unlike refugee crises that draw international aid, climate-driven displacement is often treated as “internal mobility”. This results in weak funding, patchy responses, and neglect in global reporting. For instance, while Kenya hosts over 500,000 refugees from Somalia and South Sudan, the tens of thousands that are displaced annually within Turkana by climate shocks receive little international attention.

At the policy level, climate-driven displacement is largely overlooked. Despite available frameworks, migration management remains a blind spot, weakening resilience when households are forced to move. (Government of Kenya, 2018; FDRE, 2019).

Regionally, in areas like the borderlands of Turkana–Omo, implementation of climate mobility remains minimal. Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) monitors pastoralist conflict but does not directly link this to displacement in its responses.

The result is a disconnect between early warning and humanitarian action: early signs of displacement are observed but not translated into preventive assistance.

Globally, climate displacement remains a contested issue, and efforts to create binding agreements have stalled, as most states resist obligations to host climate migrants. The International Court of Justice’s 2025 advisory opinion affirmed the duty to protect the climate system, but left the protection of displaced people unclear. Without legal innovation, communities displaced by climate pressures will remain in limbo, falling between humanitarian and migration regimes.

Unchecked climate displacement in the Turkana–Omo basin risks creating long-term instability. Projections show more frequent and intense droughts, which will force larger migration (IPCC, 2022).

The result could be protracted displacement camps, chronic humanitarian dependence and deepening conflict over shrinking resources. The displacement of livelihoods also threatens cultural continuity: pastoralist and fishing practices that have defined communities for generations risk being lost, replaced by precarious survival strategies in urban slums or insecure camps.

Moreover, displacement carries geopolitical implications. Protracted cross-border migration could inflame interstate tensions between Kenya and Ethiopia, particularly if displaced populations are perceived as security threats or demographic burdens. The militarization of borders already visible in Turkana and Dassanech areas could intensify, undermining the very mobility that has historically sustained resilience in the region.

Addressing displacement requires proactive governance, not just reactive aid. Migration should be part of national adaptation plans as a resilience tool. Planned relocation, diverse livelihoods, and safety nets can reduce the risks of forced movement.

Regional frameworks should also harmonize approaches to climate mobility, ensuring that displaced households receive consistent protection across borders. The global system under the international refugee law does not explicitly recognize those displaced by climate change. While the 1951 Refugee Convention protects individuals fleeing persecution, it does not extend to people forced to move due to environmental factors like prolonged

droughts, land degradation, or extreme weather events, leaving critical protection gaps for climate migrants.

Above all, I strongly agree that solutions must be community-driven, pastoralists and fishers themselves should be involved in designing mobility frameworks that respect cultural practices while safeguarding rights. Women's groups and youth networks can offer valuable perspectives on the gendered and generational impacts of displacement. By embedding migration into the climate–security nexus, policymakers can help transform mobility from a driver of vulnerability into a strategy of resilience. These growing movements of people not only strain limited resources but also intensify the cycle of scarcity and violence explored below.

Resource Scarcity and Recurring Displacement

The combined effect of these pressures, shrinking pastures, livestock losses, and depleted fisheries, drives chronic food insecurity and livelihood instability. Households increasingly resort to mobility strategies: temporary displacement, seasonal relocation, or

permanent migration (Gebreyes, 2022). However, without robust safety nets or adaptive alternatives, even moderate environmental shocks can trigger prolonged displacement or violent competition over resources. Community-led grazing agreements supported by NGOs like Pastoralist Community Initiative Development and Assistance (PACIDA) in Marsabit and Lotus Kenya Action For Development Organization LOKADO in Turkana have helped reduce localized clashes, but such arrangements remain fragile, especially when drought persists beyond two consecutive seasons.

The absence of coordinated cross-border resource governance leaves communities trapped in a cycle: environmental stress triggers displacement, spatial competition and conflict, which in turn erodes social resilience and adaptive capacity.

In the Turkana-Omo basin, competition over natural resources has historically been managed through customary agreements and seasonal migration patterns. However, climate variability and environmental degradation have intensified scarcity, making such



Internally displaced villagers forced off their land from increasing conflict over grazing land and cattle prepare a meal (Photo Credits: Brent Stirton/Getty Images/HRM)



Internally displaced villager carry a firearm while guarding livestock (Photo Credits: Brent Stirton/Getty Images/HRM)

arrangements increasingly fragile (Opiyo et al., 2015; Gebreyes et al., 2022). Disputes that once resulted in negotiated settlements now more frequently escalate into violent confrontations, especially and more intensively when pastoral groups encounter resistance in accessing grazing land or water. These confrontations are not limited to pastoralists but also fishing communities, whose livelihoods are threatened by declining fish levels, and increasingly come into conflict with pastoral groups over shoreline access.

Role of Small Arms and Cross-Border Dimensions

The circulation of small arms is a major conflict multiplier in this region, and the porous Kenya-Ethiopia border allows for relatively unhindered arms flows, with weapons entering through informal trade networks that stretch from South Sudan, Somalia, and beyond (Mkutu, 2008). Armed pastoralists can escalate disputes rapidly from verbal disagreements to armed raids, increasing both the lethality and frequency of violence.

Cross-border dynamics add layers of complexity, communities often straddle both sides of the border, making it difficult for national governments to enforce security measures without disrupting traditional livelihoods. The lack of coordinated security operations

and cross-border legal frameworks creates gaps that armed groups exploit (Gebreyes et al., 2022).

Cultural Drivers and Cycles of Retaliation

Cattle raiding and armed reprisals have deep cultural roots in some pastoralist communities. Historically, these raids served social and economic purposes, restocking herds after droughts. Climate stress has intensified this practice, with raids increasingly framed as necessary survival strategies rather than acts of opportunism (Aklilu & Wekesa, 2002). The result is a cycle of retaliation, where each attack invites counterattacks, embedding violence into the local conflict economy. Elders in the Dassanech community recall that cattle raids once followed strict codes of never attacking during droughts or targeting women. These taboos are weakening as survival pressures override cultural restraints. Fishing communities have also adapted to these conflict dynamics, sometimes arming themselves in self-defence. This contributes to a dangerous security environment in which the line between livelihood protection and aggression becomes blurred.

Governance Gaps and Institutional Limitations

Both Kenya and Ethiopia have implemented measures to curb violence in the Turkana-Omo basin, including

The circulation of small arms is a major conflict multiplier in this region, and the porous Kenya-Ethiopia border allows for relatively unhindered arms flows, with weapons entering through informal trade networks that stretch from South Sudan, Somalia, and beyond

disarmament campaigns, peace committees, and joint security patrols. However, these efforts face challenges:

- ❑ Limited state presence: Remote border areas often lack consistent policing or military presence.
- ❑ Weak enforcement of peace agreements: without robust follow-up, agreements break down under renewed stress.
- ❑ Political sensitivities: Border tensions sometimes intersect with ethnic and electoral politics, making conflict mitigation politically costly.

Regional initiatives, such as IGAD's Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN), monitor and share information on emerging tensions (Climate Diplomacy, n.d.). Yet, the translation of early warning into rapid, effective intervention remains inconsistent, partly due to resource constraints and competing priorities at the national level. Joint peace patrols along the Kibish border in 2023 reduced raids temporarily but collapsed once funding ended.

Conflict Feedback Loops

The interaction between environmental stress and violence in the region creates a dangerous feedback loop. Climate shocks such as drought or floods reduce resources, sparking competition. This competition, in the context of high arms availability and weak governance, escalates into violence. The resulting insecurity further undermines livelihoods, eroding community resilience and making them even more vulnerable to the next climate shock (IPCC, 2022; Gebreyes et al., 2022).

This feedback loop is not merely theoretical; it is visible in the cycles of drought, displacement, and conflict documented in the Turkana-Omo basin over the past two decades. Breaking this cycle will require interventions that address both the immediate security concerns and the underlying environmental drivers.

Policy and Regional Response

National Strategies

Kenya has adopted the National Climate Change Response Strategy (NCCRS), the National Climate Change Action Plan (NCCAP), and the Climate Change Act (2016), which integrate climate adaptation into development planning. (Government of Kenya, 2018). At the county level, peace committees and County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) in Turkana attempt to link adaptation measures with security interventions, but implementation is uneven due to limited resources (Opiyo et al., 2015).

Ethiopia pursues its Climate Resilient Green Economy (CRGE) strategy and National Adaptation Plan (NAP), which includes rangeland management, small-scale irrigation, and community conflict resolution forums. Yet, responses remain fragmented, as climate and security policies are often implemented separately and struggle to address cross-border tensions (FDRE, 2019).

Regional Frameworks

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) operates the Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN), which monitors conflict hotspots such as the Turkana-Omo basin and shares data between Ethiopia and Kenya. While CEWARN has improved information-sharing, preventive responses remain inconsistent due to limited resources and coordination gaps (IGAD, 2023).

The African Union's Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy (2022-2023) highlights the link between adaptation and peacebuilding, but implementation in the Horn of Africa relies heavily on external donor funding (African Union, 2022). The East African Community's (EAC) climate policy is relevant to Kenya but excludes Ethiopia, restricting its effectiveness across the corridor.

Community Initiatives and Gaps

Local peace committees and Non-Governmental Organizations in Turkana County and the South Omo Zone have facilitated inter-community dialogues and agreements on grazing and fishing rights, with some successes recorded in the region (Climate Diplomacy, n.d.). However, these accords remain fragile without legal enforcement or sustained funding. Key challenges include fragmented policy, weak cross-border institutions, dependence on external funding, and the collapse of agreements during periods of acute scarcity.

Additional gaps include:

- ❑ Fragmentation between climate and security policy: National climate adaptation plans often fail to integrate conflict prevention measures.
- ❑ Limited cross-border institutional capacity: While mechanisms like Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) exist, they lack enforcement powers and adequate resources.
- ❑ Dependence on donor funding: Many resilience and peacebuilding projects are externally funded and struggle with sustainability.
- ❑ Weak enforcement of agreements: Even well-negotiated local accords collapse without consistent monitoring and dispute resolution mechanisms.

Bottom of Form Turkana's county integrated development plan (2023-2027) prioritizes climate-resilient water infrastructure, while Ethiopia's Climate Resilient Green

The Turkana-Omo basin sits at the intersection of three accelerating pressures: climate change, resource scarcity, and fragile governance. While Kenya and Ethiopia have each adopted climate adaptation policies, these frameworks remain fragmented from security strategies

Economy (CRGE) emphasizes rangeland rehabilitation, and yet neither plan explicitly addresses how cross-border grazing rights should be managed during droughts. Bridging these national efforts with local peacebuilding initiatives offers the most promising route to sustainable adaptation.

Conclusion

The Turkana-Omo basin sits at the intersection of three accelerating pressures: climate change, resource scarcity, and fragile governance. While Kenya and Ethiopia have each adopted climate adaptation policies, these frameworks remain fragmented from security strategies. Without integrating climate and peacebuilding approaches, responses risk treating symptoms such as displacement or livestock losses without addressing root causes that drive cycles of conflict.

If current trends persist over the next decade, climate models suggest higher average temperatures, continued rainfall variability, and more frequent drought events in the Horn of Africa (IPCC, 2022). In this scenario, grazing and fishing resources in the corridor will likely contract further, displacing more communities into contested areas and fueling more intense cross-border disputes. From my perspective, without stronger governance, the availability of small arms will continue to magnify the lethality of these clashes. The result could be a deepening of the conflict-climate feedback loop described in this article, with higher humanitarian costs and growing regional instability.

Breaking this trajectory requires targeted multi-level action:

1. Integration of Climate Adaptation and Security Planning

National adaptation plans should explicitly link resource management with conflict prevention, particularly in border regions. This means aligning county-level climate projects in Turkana with security patrol schedules and embedding conflict resolution in rangeland and fisheries management programs.

2. Strengthening Cross-Border Governance

IGAD and AU mechanisms must move beyond early warning to coordinated, rapid response teams with a mandate to act before tensions escalate. A legal framework for shared resource use backed by both Kenya



An elderly lady pumping water for her goats at a borehole. (Photo credits: International Alert)

and Ethiopia would give community agreements greater resilience under stress.

3. Expansion of Locally-Led Resilience Initiatives

Support for locally led resilience efforts, such as peace committees, women's groups, and youth networks, should be coupled with funds for climate-resilient infrastructure, such as water harvesting systems, drought-resistant fodder production, and fishery co-management schemes.

4. Controlling the Flow of Small Arms

Both governments, with regional partners, should prioritize intelligence-led border operations targeting arms trafficking routes complemented by disarmament

initiatives that are coupled with livelihood alternatives.

5. Investing in Forward-Looking Climate Intelligence

Scenario planning and climate data modelling should guide both humanitarian preparedness and security planning. In the Turkana-Omo context, such forecasting can inform seasonal grazing plans, fishing quotas, and conflict prevention deployments.

The crisis in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya is neither inevitable nor irreversible. With integrated planning, cross-border cooperation, and sustained investment in community resilience, the region can move from reactive conflict management toward a proactive, climate-secure future.

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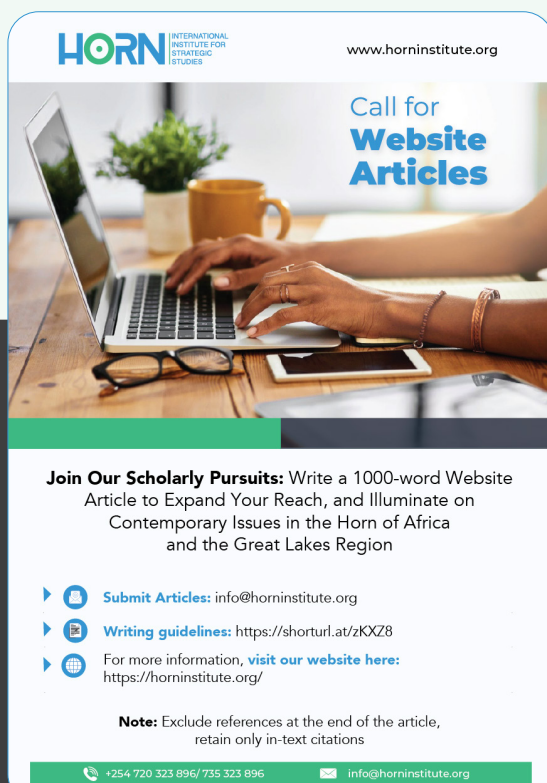


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