

# **Stopping the Bleeding in Sudan:**

## *The Strategic Value of Localized Ceasefires in a Fragmented Conflict*

*By Mutasim A. Ali\**

### **Abstract**

As the conflict in Sudan enters its fourth year, with no viable political or military resolution in sight, the discussion on the reduction of violence or cessation of hostilities cannot be more urgent. The conflict has made Sudan the world's largest humanitarian and displacement crisis for three consecutive years. In the recent past, the warring parties were united in committing mass atrocities across Sudan and suppressing pro-democracy protests, but they are now vying for power and control of the economy. This article examines a new approach to stop the bleeding in Sudan and de-escalate violence. As the warring parties continue to deploy advanced technologies and weaponry, international and regional stakeholders must focus on the cessation of hostilities rather than peace negotiations, beginning with localized ceasefires. Such an undertaking is particularly crucial in areas where the propensity for mass atrocities is heightened, given the historical context. Negotiations on peace, as I argue, require specific prerequisites, such as the provision of physical security, and must be devised by the Sudanese people with the maximum possible degree of participation to depart from Sudan's gloomy past and present toward a peaceful future.

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### **Introduction**

Since April 2023, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group formerly known as Janjaweed, have been engaged in a brutal and devastating conflict. The warring parties' joint responsibility for suppressing peaceful protests during the interim period (2019-2022) and their involvement in atrocities across Sudan has finally come to an end, as each has taken separate ways in committing crimes against Sudanese civilians. Both the SAF and the RSF showed a complete disregard for human life and the basic principles of protecting the Sudanese people. In recent months, the conflict has laid bare the destructive influence of external actors, as both the SAF and the RSF have escalated their campaigns with increasingly advanced technologies and weaponry. According to a conservative estimate, the war claimed the lives of more than 150,000 Sudanese, with over nine million people forced to leave their homes (SEMAFOR Africa, 2026). The warring parties continue to commit egregious human rights abuses against civilians, described as a "war on civilians" (Asi, 2025). Rape and sexual violence, summary executions, hostage-taking, arbitrary detention, and enforced disappearances are used as weapons of war (U.N. Doc, 2024); (Committee for Justice & AWAIFY Sudanese Organization, 2026). These violations are classified as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and in some instances even genocide (Ali & Diamond, 2024); (U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2026); (U.N. Doc, 2026). Perpetrators continue to commit these atrocities with no real consequences. As a result of the war, more than two-thirds of the Sudanese are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, making Sudan the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today (U.N. Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). In July 2024, the United Nations Famine Review Committee confirmed famine in Darfur and Kordofan, compounding the impact of the war on Sudanese civilians (IPC, 2025).

The discussion on reducing violence and ending hostilities arises from the persistent failure of attempts to resolve the conflict between the warring parties, as Sudanese civilians continue to bear the brunt of the suffering. This discourse is not only academic but also holds a political and humanitarian significance. The emphasis on localized ceasefires to mitigate violence may contribute to the broader objective of achieving a lasting peace. Notably, a lasting peace process should be inclusive of all stakeholders, not just the warring parties. The absence of such participation risks resulting in bilateral and transactional agreements that primarily cater to the interests of the most powerful parties, disregarding the well-being of civilians.

The international community and the African Union (AU) has remained largely inactive, if not absent. Sudanese civilians have been left to fend for themselves, bearing the brunt of the devastating consequences of the war against them. Beyond the massive destruction, the conflict in Sudan has now spread to threaten the stability of the Greater Horn region, with Ethiopia and South Sudan currently facing imminent threats of sliding into violence.

Against this backdrop, the article explores new possibilities for reducing violence and building trust, eventually leading to a genuinely Sudanese-led peace process. Sudan's ongoing conflict should be viewed as an opportunity to break free from the nation's gloomy history of recurring peace-making failures (Ali M. A., 2024). This alternative is only feasible through an inclusive and participatory process devised by the Sudanese people themselves. External actors lack the authority to shape a nation's destiny, and therefore, relying on the international community to bring about peace is not only ineffective but also potentially counter-productive.

## **Contextualizing Peace-Making in Sudan**

Sudan has endured over seven decades of armed conflicts and political instability. The underlying cause of these conflicts lies in the deliberate strategy charted by a select few to impose a hegemonic Islamic and Arabic identity upon a vastly diverse state. In repeated attempts to resolve conflicts, subsequent Sudanese regimes have consistently resorted to bilateral, transactional peace agreements that ultimately failed to establish lasting peace. These agreements are often signed for tactical reasons rather than a genuine interest in peace and political stability (Alier, 1991). Among the most significant agreements in this context are the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, which temporarily halted the first civil war in Sudan between the government of Sudan and the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement; the 1997 Khartoum Peace Agreement, which facilitated a resolution of conflict between the government of Sudan and the South Sudan United Democratic Salvation Front; and the 2005 Naivasha Peace Agreement, which brought an end to the conflict between the government of Sudan and the Sudanese Peoples' Liberation Movement/Army, leading to the separation of Southern Sudan in 2011. Further agreements include the 2006 Abuja Peace Agreement, which established a framework for peace between the government of Sudan and a splinter faction of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army; the 2011 Doha Document for Peace in Darfur, which aimed to address the conflict in Darfur between the government of Sudan and various Darfur armed movements; and the most recent agreement, the 2019 political pact between the Transitional Military Council and political parties representing pro-democracy protesters (Addis Ababa Agreement, 1972; Khartoum Peace Agreement, 1997; CPA, 2005; Abuja Peace Agreement, 2006; Doha Document for Peace in Darfur, 2011) (Political Agreement Between the Military Council and the Forces of Freedom and Change, 2019). This agreement established an interim period following the overthrow of Islamists, who had imposed three decades of oppression and terrorism. Later in 2020, the Juba Peace Agreement was signed between the Transitional government and armed movements (Juba Peace Agreement, 2020).

It is in this context that the war in April 2023 should be understood as a continuation of an approach that has repeatedly proven to be unsuccessful. Sudan's experience with these bilateral peace accords has led to a widespread perception that all Sudanese conflicts were resolved through peace agreements. While this assertion is partially correct, it overlooks the fact that these agreements did not break the cycle of conflict and violence in Sudan. Therefore, it is plausible to assert that the absence of a lasting peace in Sudan can be attributed to these types of agreements.

### **International Stakeholders' Peace Efforts: A Fragmented Terrain**

Efforts to end hostilities in Sudan began in the first month with the Saudi-American initiative. In May 2023, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), along with the United States, convened the warring parties in Jeddah and signed the Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan (Jeddah Declaration of Commitment, 2023). Despite the SAF and RSF's failure to uphold their obligations under the Declaration, the initiative remains the only viable and serious pathway to reducing violence in Sudan. Its emphasis on respecting their armed conduct and civilian lives, rather than encompassing a broader peace process, sets it apart from all other initiatives. The parties explicitly stated, "We acknowledge that the commitment to the Declaration of Commitment will not alter any legal, security, or political status of the parties signing it, nor will it be associated with participation in any political process." As I assert, this framing is essential to prevent past failures. A genuine peace process demands the broader participation of the Sudanese people. For this to occur, specific conditions must be fulfilled to ensure meaningful participation by the Sudanese, especially women, youth, and displaced persons. These conditions include, among other things, the provision of physical security to the Sudanese civilians. This will ensure that a new

peace agreement will not result in a power-sharing arrangement between powerful armed actors or the political elite. The Jeddah initiative, however, is dented by a lack of a well-defined implementation and enforcement mechanism, which ultimately contributed to its failure. As discussed in the following sections, the opportunity to revive the Jeddah initiative remains still if certain reforms are introduced.

In addition to the Jeddah initiative, there are a few other attempts with varying objectives that reflect the role of external actors involved. One that warrants a particular mention is the Quad, a self-appointed group comprising the United States, the KSA, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. It is convened by the United States, largely because of its significant involvement in the conflict, providing material and political support to the warring parties. The U.S. Administration's strategy appears to be that, for the war to end, the Quad members must negotiate their interests first. The objective is for the Quad members to use their political and economic leverage to pressure the warring parties into negotiations.

Early this year, the Quintet group, comprising the United Nations (UN), the AU, the Arab League, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, was established to support the efforts to end hostilities and facilitate dialogue and political transition (U.N. Secretary-General, 2026). All these forums, while they include important actors, have little chance of ending violence and restoring democratic transition in Sudan. For the Quad, the geopolitical rivalry among its members, coupled with some directly contributing to the conflict, renders the group ineffective. On its part, the Quintet comprises major regional organizations that have played a key role in numerous Sudan's peace agreements. However, their primary focus on facilitating political dialogue and restoring democratic transitions may not be as pertinent at this time.

### **Reframing Sequencing: Peace vs. Ceasefire**

As demonstrated in the preceding sections, Sudan is known for its protracted armed conflict and political instability that has resulted in numerous peace accords—yet it has failed to achieve a lasting peace. In fact, according to the PA-X, the largest and most authoritative database on peace agreements, Sudan is the second country with the most peace agreements in the last 35 years, behind Colombia (Bell & Sanja, 2019). Sudanese peace designers and their international stakeholders have employed a nearly identical tactic: making warring parties negotiate agreements that ultimately led to a power-sharing formula. The fragility of such a formula is that it incentivizes the excluded groups to carry arms. Also, because it is transactional, once a party is dissatisfied with the implementation, there is little incentive to honor the agreement's terms. This explains the reasons why, at times, the same armed groups would sign multiple peace agreements, effectively keeping Sudan in the cycle of violence for the last seven decades.

In this article, I argue that Sudanese stakeholders and international mediators should shift their approach. The current war should be seen as an opportunity to achieve a durable peace in Sudan. At the outset, it is imperative to distinguish between two objectives: a peace process and a ceasefire. Firstly, peace is a lengthy process that, given Sudan's historical context, requires an inclusive and participatory approach. This process should involve Sudanese stakeholders beyond the armed actors. It should be designed by the Sudanese people, with minimal involvement of international actors, given its sensitivity and long-term impact on shaping the state's political and economic structures. For a successful and legitimate peace agreement, the Sudanese people must be the owners and be the ultimate guarantors. Certain conditions must be met for a genuine and participatory peace process to commence. These conditions include the provision of physical

security and basic humanitarian necessities. In other words, a ceasefire agreement must be in place first and foremost, which leads me to the second point, a ceasefire agreement.

While there is no uniform definition of the term 'ceasefire,' it is generally understood as the codification of a specific military and political state of affairs during wartime (Sosnowski, 2023). A ceasefire agreement is part of the broader peace process, which aims to agree on the timing, form, and content of arrangements to end violence (Hofmann & Schneckener, 2011). It is characterized by spatial limitations, a shorter timeframe, a lower degree of formality, and less expansive provisions (Lundgren, Svensson, & Karakus, 2023). The purpose and agenda of the ceasefire are determined by the parties to the violence and/or affected communities. A ceasefire is essential in reducing violence, but cannot alone lead to a lasting peace. Unlike a peace process, a ceasefire benefits greatly from the involvement of international and regional stakeholders in both designing the agreement and ensuring its implementation (U.N.D.P., 2022).

It should be noted, however, that while not legal documents, ceasefire agreements impart an aura of formality and legitimacy (Hultman & Mousa, 2025). The dilemma, therefore, is that a ceasefire agreement endorses and acknowledges the *status quo*, which can activate rivalries, machinations of control, or create particular control for different parties (Hultman & Mousa, 2025). It creates a new order, a wartime order (Hultman & Mousa, 2025). As such, ceasefires can lead to escalation or de-escalation depending on how the agreement is designed or reached. The agreement can be used strategically to increase the warring parties' ability to achieve their goals. But it can also be used to build trust and pave the way for lasting peace by ending violence. It can create a cooperative environment even amid antagonism and violence (Lundgren, Svensson, & Karakus, 2023).

### **Localized Ceasefires: A Pathway to Violence Reduction in Sudan**

Sudan's ongoing conflict has now entered its fourth year, with no prospect of a peaceful resolution in sight. Despite the immense human suffering and destruction, the warring parties' appetite for more violence grows exponentially. In a recent statement, the Director of the World Health Organization confirmed that 2,036 people were killed in 213 attacks on health care facilities (Ghebreyesus, 2026). In many of these attacks, the warring parties used drones and airstrikes, deliberately targeting unambiguously civilian objects (Fleming, 2026).

The priority should now be protecting lives over peace negotiations for reasons stated in the preceding paragraphs. In 2007, the UN, in coordination with the AU, mandated the largest peace operation, tasked with reducing violence. While not specifically tasked with the protection of civilians, its mandate included crucial provisions, including promoting efforts to disarm the Janjaweed, now the RSF, and other militias (U.N., 2007). Regrettably, the UN Security Council effectively terminated the Darfur mission in December 2020, despite the escalating violence in the region (U.N.S.C., 2020). Notwithstanding the criticism for the failure to end violence (Reeves, 2018), the mission could have been enhanced to mitigate mass atrocities happening now.

Given the current geopolitical landscape, both regionally and internationally, it appears highly improbable that a similar mission would be mandated. With the international community remaining largely indifferent or incapable of effectively responding to the crisis in Sudan, the only viable option for protecting civilians lies within Sudan itself. This is even though the SAF and the RSF demonstrate no genuine interest in ending violence. The warring parties and their allied militias have diminished incentives to engage in a good-faith process to end the conflict, as they

all believe they could militarily win the fight. These insights prompt the discussion on localized ceasefires.

Localized or geographic ceasefires are limited to specific areas, such as a city, town, or village (Lundgren, Svensson, & Karakus, 2023). The objectives include protecting populations at risk and de-escalating conflict in a particular location. Such ceasefires can help determine the feasibility of a wider or national ceasefire (U.N.D.P., 2022). They are meant to protect civilians and enable humanitarian access to the vulnerable. Even relatively limited pauses or area-based deals can temporarily stop shelling, drone strikes, raids, or pillaging. The localized ceasefires seek to establish dialogue between the protagonists in the conflict or disaster without political pretensions. Localized ceasefires are pragmatic tools in fragmented wars. Evidence suggests that gradual solutions provide possible pathways to de-escalation in conflict resolution (Lundgren, Svensson, & Karakus, 2023).

In Sudan, particularly in Darfur, where the historical context exacerbates the propensity for mass atrocities, there exists a mechanism known as *Judiya*, which can be used to establish localized ceasefires. The *Judiya* is a local mechanism for conflict resolution, mediation, reconciliation, and justice. This system is not unique to Sudan—it is prevalent in Burundi, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Uganda, among others (Huyse & Salter, 2008). It is viewed as a successful traditional institution for administering justice (Martin, Badrī, & Jamal, 2005). It consists of *Ajaweed*, or individuals selected from communities of elders and wisdom, who are well aware of the environment, its complexity, and historical contexts. Like the jury system, they serve voluntarily in *Judiya*. The *Judiya*, therefore, represents a mechanism that is driven and controlled by the parties themselves. It depends on key principles to be effective: (a) mediators are volunteers; (b) all parties voluntarily accept them before the commencement of the proceedings; (c) the law governing the process is customary law and tradition; and (d) the implementation of the *Judiya* is a shared responsibility of the parties to the conflict, the mediators, and the community as a whole. Community leaders serve as guarantors for the implementation of the final agreement (Gado, 2013).

The *Judiya* can serve as a mechanism to promote localized cessation of hostilities and can be successful if supported by the international and regional stakeholders, particularly with a robust enforcement and implementation strategy. Indeed, given the power dynamics in favor of the RSF and its allied militias, which are heavily armed and equipped with the most sophisticated weapons and technologies, the necessity of international backing with severe consequences for spoilers becomes vital. A robust international backing can reduce violence as other efforts to establish a national ceasefire continue.

Ultimately, localized ceasefires are not as straightforward as they seem. They face numerous challenges, chief among them being the unwillingness to participate in the process due to the imbalance of power, fragmented armed actors, and weak enforcement mechanisms. Nonetheless, here I outline four reasons for their success in Darfur, where a *Judiya* mechanism is already in place and can potentially be extended to other regions—hopefully, the conflict is resolved before waiting to measure the success of this approach in Darfur. First, localized ceasefires are less complex than a nationwide ceasefire between armed groups and the government. During a nationwide ceasefire, actors may be temporarily incentivized to increase violence to strengthen their bargaining position at the negotiation table or to spoil the peace process if they are excluded. Second, without normalizing or legitimizing the *status quo*, many actors in Darfur share similar political views of Sudan, particularly narratives countering the Islamic Movement in Sudan and

advocating an equitable distribution of power and wealth. As such, it is a win-win for all the actors in Darfur, at least since the RSF controls most of Sudan's western region. Third, localized ceasefires help bridge the trust deficit among the Darfurians and step towards the inevitable reconciliation in a region torn by decades of devastating conflicts and atrocities. This, in turn, makes the comprehensive and national peace less complex. Finally, the international and regional communities' role of signaling will pressure the parties to show that they are able to control their fighters and impose reputational and punitive costs on those failing to abide by the terms of ceasefires.

## Conclusion

The conflict in Sudan's impact extends beyond its socially disintegrating effects to pose a direct threat to the very existence of specific ethnic groups. In particular, the non-Arab communities in Darfur are at constant risk of mass atrocities. The international community's response has been inadequate, and its actions cannot be relied upon to protect civilians effectively. Furthermore, given the warring parties' lack of interest in ending violence, Sudanese civilians are left to seek creative approaches to minimize violence. As the article demonstrates, it is imperative to prioritize localized ceasefires over national or broader peace processes, as the latter must be preceded by efforts to create an environment conducive to meaningful participation by Sudanese civilians alongside armed actors. The existing regional and international forums dedicated to promoting humanitarian truces between the warring parties should be directed towards supporting local ceasefires based on traditional mechanisms, such as the *Judiya*. However, it is crucial to clarify that such arrangements should not be perceived as legitimizing the current *status quo*. That way, we can ensure some protection for civilians as the Sudanese continue their pursuit of a national ceasefire and comprehensive peace negotiations.

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