

Opinion **Africa**

Sudan's last hope lies in external actors ending the war

Middle Eastern states and their allies must not continue to exploit the country as a battleground for their rivalries

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Smoke billows during air strikes in central Khartoum. Neither side in the civil war can win militarily or politically, yet both have powerful external backers © Al Migdad Hassan/AFP/Getty Images

Payton Knopf YESTERDAY

The writer was deputy special envoy for the Horn of Africa in the Biden administration and is a former adviser to two US special envoys for Sudan

The generals of the Sudanese Armed Forces may be celebrating the US decision on January 7 to impose sanctions on their nemesis, Rapid Support Forces leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, citing genocide. But the announcement risks obscuring a more fundamental truth about Sudan's brutal war: there will neither be a military victor nor a peace predicated on either the SAF or the RSF. Shifting power dynamics in the Middle East, however, present an opportunity and an incentive to end the war and take the country off the larger geopolitical chessboard.

After more than 20 months of conflict, Sudan is Gaza on the Nile. The capital, Khartoum, and other cities and villages are levelled. It is the largest state to collapse in modern history and the largest displacement crisis in the world today. The remaining population is enduring what will probably be the worst famine in Africa in 100 years.

Many of the same Middle Eastern countries that will most influence Syria's future — Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates — also hold the keys to Sudan's. These states face a choice. They could continue to exploit Sudan as a

battleground for their rivalries, in which military victory is impossible, while the country falls further into the abyss. Or, in concert with Sudan's neighbours — principally Chad, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and South Sudan — they can forge a consensus around a set of parameters for resolving the conflict, a first step towards stabilising a geopolitical hotspot at the crossroads of Africa and the Middle East.

Sudan's war is not an asymmetric battle between a government and a rebel group. It is a war of symmetric weakness — neither the SAF nor the RSF can win militarily or politically. But both have powerful external backers.

While the SAF fancies itself a government, it controls a smaller area of Sudan than Bashar al-Assad held in Syria little more than a month ago. Its fate depends on the largesse of Iran, Russia and Egypt, all facing significant challenges of their own. Their support could draw a negative response from countries such as Israel.

The SAF has delegitimised itself by systematically blocking life-saving aid to address the famine and bears primary responsibility for mass starvation. The RSF has, of course, equally delegitimised itself through genocidal violence, war crimes and crimes against humanity — which have sparked international condemnation of the UAE for backing the paramilitary force.

Peace is more likely to be made around the belligerents than through them. And the outlines of an endgame in Sudan may be more easily reached among western partners in the Middle East, particularly if US president-elect Donald Trump were to signal an expectation of progress. A regional consensus on the shape of a settlement would force the belligerents to the sidelines and provide a breathing space for Sudan's diverse civilian constituencies to negotiate a transitional government.

Building a consensus would depend on a few core criteria. First, the leadership of the SAF, the RSF and former president Omar al-Bashir's National Congress party would be excluded from any transitional administration and any future government of Sudan.

Second, unity and territorial integrity within existing borders are sacrosanct and Sudan's sovereignty resides with its people. The monopoly of force must be returned to a legitimate government, which requires the cessation of interference in Sudanese affairs by non-Sudanese, including by providing arms and materiel.

Third, sovereign institutions, including the central bank and National Petroleum Corporation, must be run by technocrats not beholden to military actors.

Sudan's last hope is that Middle Eastern states supporting the SAF and the RSF put an end to the war out of their own self-interest — if not in the interests of the Sudanese people.

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