Sudan: Liberal Peacebuilding and the Price of Impunity

written by Husam Mahjoub | August 4, 2026

CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE

MUZAN ALNEEL

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Many a Sudanese who fled Sudan to Egypt after the war erupted in the capital, Khartoum, on April 15, 2023, told a similar version of the following story. They met Syrians living there, and the Sudanese told them: we are here for a few months until the war ends. The Syrians responded: right, this is exactly what we said twelve years ago.

The weight of that exchange is not merely anecdotal. The war that entered its fourth year on April 15, 2026, is not Sudan's first conflict, but the latest eruption in a pattern so consistent across seven decades that its recurrence should surprise no one, and yet each generation of Sudanese and each iteration of the so-called international community approaches every new catastrophe as though the previous ones produced no lessons worth learning, when in fact those lessons are abundant and precise, only inconvenient for the actors with the power to apply them.

When this war erupted, many Sudanese expected it to end quickly. The two warring factions knew each other intimately. The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) was practically a creation of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF); its commander, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, had been nurtured and institutionalized by the very military establishment he was now fighting. Two forces that know each other's tactics, commanders, and supply lines, people reasoned, do not need to fight a prolonged war. That logic collapsed within weeks as the conflict evolved into something that does not resemble any of Sudan's previous wars in its scale, geography, or depth of external entanglement.

Now, as the war has turned Sudan into the world's largest humanitarian and displacement crisis,[1] Sudanese civilians are confronting a harder truth, that they have very little say in how this war develops or how it ends, with its trajectory determined by those who hold the guns and by those who supply them. Yet the options available to civilians are real and center on two demands that have been evaded in every previous Sudanese peace process. The first is genuine accountability for those responsible for the war and the atrocities committed in it. The second is a serious commitment to the conditions of a dignified life, including development, services, and economic opportunity for the communities that have borne the cost of every war and received almost nothing from any of the agreements that ended them. Organizing around these demands is what will determine whether civilians can affect the survival of millions of people now and shape the terms on which Sudan eventually rebuilds.

The Pattern the International Community Refuses to Learn From

Sudan's civil wars began as a result of the deliberate policies of a colonial administration and a post-colonial elite that chose extraction over development, exclusion over citizenship, and armed pacification over the provision of the roads, schools, hospitals, and political representation that might have made a different history possible.

The British administered different regions of Sudan according to varying degrees of interest and exploitation. The country's center received investment, education, basic services, and administrative infrastructure. The peripheries, the south, the west (Darfur and Kordofan), the east, and the Blue Nile region were administered with the thinnest possible apparatus, their resources extracted and their populations left with no pathway into the national elite and no expectation of services from a state that treated them as a source of revenue rather than as citizens with rights and needs. The late colonial decision that merged the separately administered south into a unified state on the eve of independence, without genuine political negotiation or compact, handed the Sudanese state a structural contradiction it has never resolved.

The First Civil War, ignited by a military mutiny in Torit in August 1955 and burning through the country for seventeen years, was rooted in the absence of development, the lack of basic services, the monopoly of power by northern elites, and the imposition of an Arab-Islamic cultural framework on populations that were neither. The Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972 ended that war by granting the south regional autonomy. That held until 1983 when Nimeiry redivided the south, breaking the agreement he had signed and prompting the emergence of the SPLM/A under John Garang, whose concept of a "New Sudan" carried an internal tension between creating a secular federal Sudan for all its people and separating from it all the way to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005,[2] which deferred that tension into a referendum. The south voted for independence in 2011 and South Sudan descended into its own civil war within two years, while the SPLM-North returned to fighting Khartoum in South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

The Darfur war, which erupted in 2003, was treated throughout the CPA process as a distraction rather than the same structural logic operating in a different region. Khartoum's response to the Darfur insurgency, conducted through the Janjaweed militias, produced the instrument that would eventually turn on its creators, an armed militia loyal to a commander, answerable to personal and familial authority, financed through gold, and sustained by impunity. The Janjaweed were later institutionalized into the Rapid Support Forces. The international response produced the Abuja Agreement in 2006 and the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur in 2011, both following the same template of negotiating among armed factions, distributing cabinet positions and military ranks, promising development funds that never reached the communities that needed them, and declaring peace without enforcement and without any accountability for those who had ordered and conducted mass killing. The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for Omar al-Bashir in 2009[3] and charged him with genocide in 2010, yet he remained president until 2019 and traveled freely to signatory states without arrest. The warrant became a symbol of international impotence in the face of political convenience rather than of international justice.

Far from a series of accidental failures, this approach represents a consistent pattern with entirely predictable results. Wars rooted in resource deprivation, the denial of a dignified life, and exclusion are fundamentally unresolvable through elite bargains that leave structural conditions intact. Rewarding belligerents with power and wealth simply incentivizes new factions to emerge. Ultimately, deferring justice is an act of complicity that directly cultivates the next conflict.

The Revolution and Its Betrayal

To comprehend the current war, it is necessary to grasp the moment that preceded it, for that moment constitutes, in a fundamental sense, what the war is designed to destroy.

In December 2018, protests sparked by rising bread prices became a nationwide movement led by youth, women, professional bodies, political parties, and neighborhood-based resistance committees. What began as a demand for economic relief by a population that could no longer afford to eat quickly became something larger, a demand for the transformation of a state that had never delivered development, services, or basic security to the majority of its people. In April 2019, the military bowed to popular pressure and removed Bashir from power. The slogans of that revolution, freedom, peace, and justice, were not rhetorical aspirations but a precise diagnosis of what Sudanese people had been denied across generations and a clear demand for civilian governance, accountability for decades of military rule and atrocity, and the material conditions of human dignity for all Sudanese.

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Then came June 3, 2019, when forces from the RSF and the Sudanese army dispersed a peaceful sit-in camp outside the military headquarters where protesters had gathered for months demanding a democratic transition. Hundreds were killed, bodies were thrown into the Nile, and women were raped in what was an ordered massacre whose perpetrators, General Burhan of SAF and General Hemedti of RSF as president and vice president of the Transitional Military Council, were known to everyone in Sudan. The international community's response was to push for a power-sharing arrangement between the civilian political forces and the very military leaders responsible instead of demanding accountability, producing a transitional government that preserved military control over security and economic assets while international actors praised the process and focused their energies on integrating Sudan into IMF and World Bank programs and on the Abraham Accords normalization track with Israel. The aspirations of the revolution were subordinated to the priorities of external actors for whom stability and financial integration mattered more than justice or dignity.

As a direct result of this power-sharing agreement, an official committee was formed to investigate the June massacre. Given a six-month mandate, the committee produced no conclusions after more than two years, and at most could have indicted lower- and mid-ranking officers, since the men who ordered the massacre were simultaneously partners of the civilian political forces in the transitional government. The coup of October 25, 2021, removed the civilian components entirely, protesters again were shot, and the international community responded again by pushing for a framework agreement granting effective amnesty for both the June 2019 massacre and the coup killings, an agreement approaching signature when the war began in April 2023.

This War and the Forces Behind It

Sudan's previous civil wars were driven by movements with ideological content, territorial bases, and genuine links to the communities in whose name they fought. The SPLM/A had a political program. Darfuri rebel movements like the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) articulated demands for inclusion, development, and accountability that reflected real community grievances despite anything that can be said about their narrow ethnic composition. One could negotiate with them because they had something beyond military victory to negotiate toward.

The RSF has none of these characteristics,[4] functioning instead as a feudal enterprise organized around the Dagalo family with Hemedti at its head and his brother Abdel Rahim as his deputy. It operates as a militia of militias, constructed by aggregating armed formations that developed across western Sudan for varied reasons, including remnant Janjaweed structures from the Darfur genocide, tribal mobilization units, armed gangs active in weapons and drug smuggling or human trafficking, and locally recruited forces that various Khartoum governments had armed for their own purposes over decades. As an institution, it is dependent on its leadership in a way the SPLM/A never was, such that without the Dagalo brothers it is likely to fragment into the regional configurations from which it was assembled. This could send Sudan back into the kind of frozen regional conflicts the state has learned to manage. Rebel movements have long controlled small pockets, such as the SLM in Jebel Marra or the SPLM-North in South Kordofan, and Sudanese governments and army have historically accommodated such configurations. This accommodation persists partly because a permanent, low-intensity conflict justifies emergency rule and relieves the state of any obligation to provide services or development.

Most of the men fighting in the RSF's ranks are young men from Darfur and Kordofan and from the African Sahel region who joined because there was no other viable economic option, enlistment offering a wage or access to spoils in regions that decades of deliberate underdevelopment have left without schools, hospitals, or economic opportunity, the same calculus that drives migration across the Sahara toward Europe, where dignified work disappears and rights are empty promises and young men choose between forms of risk rather than between futures. The distinction between the RSF's leadership and its fighters therefore matters enormously for any post-war framework, and the recent defections of some RSF commanders to the SAF side, received by communities with a complex and pragmatic openness rooted in the survival imperative of weakening the RSF rather than in forgetting what those commanders did, illustrates how that complexity must inform any honest discussion of accountability and reintegration.

The SAF represents the continuation of the Sudanese deep state with its Islamist ideological residue and its fundamental interest in maintaining unaccountable military rule, its commanders fighting to preserve an institutional order in which the military sits above civilian authority and above any obligation to deliver services, development, or dignity to the populations it nominally defends. The SAF's recapture of territory from the RSF, welcome as it is for communities living under RSF occupation and atrocity, carries no commitment to the democratic transition the 2019 revolution

demanded or to the material transformation of the relationship between the Sudanese state and its peripheral populations that would make that transition meaningful.

The UAE, the External Actors, and the War That Was Prepared

The most significant structural difference between this war and every previous Sudanese conflict is the nature and depth of UAE involvement. Sudan's earlier wars had external dimensions: neighboring states, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Libya, Chad, the Central African Republic, Egypt, Uganda, Kenya, and further afield Israel, the United Kingdom, the United States, Russia, France, Italy, Norway, Sweden, and others, intervened, supplied, mediated, and complicated those conflicts in various ways. What the UAE is doing in Sudan is something qualitatively different.

The UAE prepared for this war rather than merely responding to it. In the months before April 2023, Emirati-linked networks were building the RSF's media and information infrastructure and establishing networks of fake accounts and coordinated inauthentic behavior designed to shape international perceptions of the conflict. When the war began, the UAE facilitated weapons and logistical supplies to the RSF through the Wagner Group and to Haftar militia networks through Libya; established a hospital in Amdjarass in eastern Chad as cover for weapons transfers[5] and treatment of wounded RSF fighters; set up a similar facility in Aweil in South Sudan near the Sudanese border; and diversified supply routes through Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, Somaliland, the Central African Republic, and Cameroon. Ethiopia established a secret training camp[6] near the Sudanese border to prepare thousands of RSF fighters, with the UAE financing the facility and providing trainers and logistical support. The UAE also recruited Colombian mercenaries to fight alongside the RSF, a fact the international community has acknowledged by sanctioning the Colombian nationals and companies involved while declining to impose any measures on the Emirati officials who recruited them. A *Le Monde* investigation[7] published in March 2026 documented cargo flights from Fujairah in the UAE to the Central African Republic that continued after the outbreak of the U.S.–Israel war on Iran and amidst direct Iranian attacks on the UAE. This suggests that Abu Dhabi may be reading the conflict with Iran as a confirmation of its strategic logic, namely, that extending influence deep into Africa, beyond its volatile immediate geography, is precisely the right response to an insecure regional environment in which Iran and a potentially rival Saudi Arabia represent its primary threats.

The UAE's role is best understood through the framework of sub-imperialism,[8] whereby it behaves as an imperialist power within its own region while remaining aligned with the interests of the United States as the dominant imperial power, seeking political leverage and economic capture while using militia patronage to suppress regional democratic transformations across fragmented, institution-weak countries. The roots of this role go back to 2011, when the Arab Spring confronted Abu Dhabi with an existential threat[9] to its model of governance, prompting it to become an organized counterrevolutionary force that bankrolled the coup that brought Sisi to power in Egypt, backed Haftar's war in Libya, and deepened ties with non-state armed actors that could contain democratic mobilization. The Sudanese revolution of December 2018 posed that threat again, and the RSF became its instrument for containing it, with Sudan's gold, its vast fertile lands, its Red Sea position, and its size making it a central laboratory for this project, the RSF's hold on gold mining producing a flow of conflict gold to Dubai that converts atrocity into capital.

The other external actors present a more complex and less committed picture. Egypt has moved from political and logistical support for the SAF to direct military intervention, operating Turkish-made combat drones from a covert airbase near the Sudanese border,[10] driven by alarm at RSF advances toward the Nile corridor, though Egypt remains financially dependent on the UAE in ways that constrain how far it can press against Emirati interests. Saudi Arabia, the one regional power with the weight to seriously challenge the UAE's role, has grown increasingly concerned about RSF

dominance near the Red Sea, but carries its own complex agenda and unresolved tensions with Abu Dhabi that have so far prevented it from acting decisively. Iran has sold weapons to the SAF but cannot fully trust the Sudanese military establishment, given that al-Bashir severed relations with Tehran in late 2014 to align with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Turkey has also supplied weapons without deeper engagement. None of these actors matches the UAE's strategic commitment or operational depth, and none of the international community's diplomatic frameworks has been willing to name that asymmetry plainly, let alone act on it.

How This War Might End, and Why That Matters

Understanding how this war might end is necessary for understanding what the international community must do and what civilians must prepare for.

The war could end through military victory, with a decisive SAF advance removing or neutralizing the RSF leadership and causing the force to fall into disarray. The conflict would then likely revert to the kind of frozen, low-intensity warfare Sudan has historically absorbed. It could end through a negotiated settlement distributing power and resources among the belligerents and their preferred civilian allies, which based on the history reviewed above would extend the cycle of violence rather than break it. It could produce a de facto frozen partition, with the RSF controlling parts of Darfur and other western regions and the SAF controlling the center and east, both sides relieved of accountability and of any obligation to govern effectively. Or it could produce state collapse, fragmentation into zones of armed control with no authority capable of governing or providing services, a trajectory toward something resembling Libya. Or some combination of these trajectories may materialize differently in various parts of the country.

What matters is that none of these possible endings produces the conditions of a dignified life for Sudanese communities unless accompanied by accountability for those who conducted the war and a binding commitment to development, services, and economic opportunity in the regions that have borne its cost. A military victory that restores SAF dominance without accountability is a return to the conditions that produced the revolution of 2018. A negotiated settlement that rewards the RSF's leadership with political survival is an invitation to the next war. A frozen conflict leaves millions without services, rights, or futures. The question of how the war ends cannot be separated from the question of what it ends toward.

Peace Processes Built to Reproduce the Problem

What the international community has applied to Sudan, repeatedly and with remarkable consistency, is what scholars of conflict call the liberal peacebuilding model, whose assumptions are roughly as follows: wars end when belligerents reach a mutually hurting stalemate; peace agreements distribute power and wealth, which create incentives for elites to stop fighting; internationally supervised transitions can build legitimate institutions. In this case, accountability, if it must come at all, can wait until after stability is achieved.

Sudan's wars do not begin as elite competitions for power, though they become that. They begin as conflicts over land, water, services, and development, over whether communities in the periphery will be left to subsist without roads, schools, hospitals, or political representation while the center extracts their resources. These material grievances are then politicized and ethnicized by elites on all sides, who find that identity is a more effective mobilizing tool than class interest. By the time the international community arrives with its peace process, it is negotiating with the ethnic and political leaders who have risen to prominence through the conflict, not with the communities that began it. The resulting agreements distribute power among those leaders and promise development funds that rarely materialize in the communities that need them, leaving the structural conditions that

produced the war entirely untouched. When perpetrators of mass violence are incorporated into transitional governments, as Sudanese military leaders have been repeatedly, they bring with them both the incentive and the capacity to reverse any transition that threatens their freedom or their assets, and the international community's preferred solution to this problem, the truth commission, the reconciliation committee, the investigative body with a mandate broad enough to look credible and powers narrow enough to threaten no one, has resolved nothing.

The Juba Peace Agreement of 2020 between the transitional government and several armed movements is the most recent illustration of this model in practice. It distributed ministerial positions and military ranks, promised development for war-affected regions, and rewarded those with guns while marginalizing those without. Ultimately, by addressing neither land rights nor accountability for atrocities, it produced no peace for the refugees or the displaced.

Against this background, the Quartet framework of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the United States, formed in September 2025, contained as a core member the primary external sponsor of one of the warring parties, making it less a peace process than a management exercise designed to give the appearance of international engagement while protecting the UAE from consequences. The Quintet framework of the African Union, the Arab League, the European Union, IGAD (the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, an African trade bloc), and the United Nations is broader but not more effective, since none of its members has been willing to confront the UAE's role or center the Sudanese civilian forces that represent the actual social fabric of Sudanese life, elevating instead the political factions that external powers find familiar and manageable and replicating exactly the elite-capture dynamic that has destroyed every previous Sudanese peace process. The gap between the international community's analysis of this pattern and its willingness to act on it is a political choice rather than a failure of understanding, a choice rooted in the calculus that disrupting the existing arrangement would require subordinating the interests of powerful external actors to the rights and dignity of Sudanese civilians.

The Accountability That Cannot Be Deferred, and the Dignity That Must Be Built

The question that every discussion of Sudan's peace process dances around and must stop dancing around is this: how do you end this war without holding its perpetrators accountable and without committing seriously to the conditions of a dignified life for the communities that have borne the cost of every war Sudan has fought? The answer that Sudan's history makes inescapable is that you cannot, not durably, not justly, and not without simply setting the conditions for the next cycle of violence. Impunity has functioned throughout this history as the engine of recurrence, and the absence of development has operated as one of the primary mechanisms through which the cycle reproduces itself, generating the poverty, the displacement, and the absence of alternatives that fill the ranks of every new armed movement.

No end to this war is conceivable while the RSF exists in any form with its current leadership intact. Its leaders, and the leaders of the SAF and other armed factions who have committed crimes, must be held accountable and must have no place in any future political or security arrangement. No militias should exist in a post-war Sudan. The leaders of both military and political factions suspected of crimes must face trial in a court with genuine authority and genuine independence, whether the ICC itself, a hybrid court built on ICC standards, or a domestic tribunal modeled on those standards and conducted in Arabic and/or local Sudanese languages with Sudanese judges and lawyers embedded in all its functions, as close as possible to the Sudanese people and the communities that suffered the crimes.

The examples of South Africa, Rwanda, Morocco, Chile, and Argentina are often invoked as models of transitional justice that allowed societies to move forward without full accountability. The record

of those experiments, examined honestly, does not support the optimism. South Africa's inequality has deepened and for the majority of Black South Africans little has changed economically or socially. Rwanda has become a dictatorship. Morocco's democratic reforms have remained minimal. Chile and Argentina are swinging back toward political forces loyal to the dictators of the 1970s. Transitional justice mechanisms that absorb accountability into process while leaving power structures intact do not produce justice, and Sudan has no reason to expect different results from the same approach.

For lower-ranking soldiers and fighters below the command level, particularly the young men who joined because militia membership was the only available livelihood in regions left without development investment for decades, a different framework is required, one that draws on Sudanese traditions of community reconciliation through an open, nationwide process of accountability design, including the Judiya and Galid mediation processes conducted by community elders, combined with truth and documentation mechanisms that create public, recorded acknowledgment of what happened and to whom. Accountability at the community level cannot be separated from the material question of what comes after. Former fighters, victims, and displaced communities all require pathways to a dignified life. This demands economic development programs in war-affected regions, alongside healthcare, education, housing, and employment opportunities, making militia membership and dangerous migration unnecessary rather than the only available choices.

Financial reparation is essential and must be substantial, with the primary source being the seized assets of the RSF leadership and compensation from its international backers, primarily the UAE government, since the reconstruction of every community destroyed in this war should be financed by those who destroyed it. Land rights, which are at the root of conflicts across Darfur and Kordofan and which represent for many communities the most concrete dimension of the dignified life the revolution demanded, must be addressed directly. Traditional reconciliation mechanisms deserve serious engagement at the community level as complements to formal accountability, provided they are not used, as they have been used in the past, to distribute money and vehicles, to promise militia recruitment as economic relief, or to manipulate local governance structures in ways that divide communities and undermine social integration.

The slogans of the December 2018 revolution — freedom, peace, and justice — were always a demand for human dignity in its fullest sense encompassing not only the political freedoms and legal protections that the word dignity can be reduced to, but the material foundation that makes those freedoms real, the schools, the hospitals, the economic opportunities, the services, and the security of knowing that the state exists to serve its people rather than to extract from them. Every peace process that addresses the political arrangement without addressing that material foundation is one that will not hold, because the communities whose underdevelopment fueled the conflict will remain underdeveloped, and the next generation of young men will face the same choices their fathers faced.

What Must Be Demanded

The international community is complicit in Sudan. Western governments have the economic and diplomatic leverage to make Emirati support for the RSF costly, the assets of the UAE government and Emirati companies involved in sustaining the RSF are traceable and present in the banking systems and real estate markets of every major Western city, and sanctions on those networks have simply not been imposed. The same governments that sanctioned Colombian nationals for recruiting mercenaries[11] to fight with the RSF have refused to impose any measures on the Emirati officials who recruited them. If the international community is serious about ending this war, the minimum it must do is confront the UAE's role directly and stop constructing peace frameworks that exclude Sudanese civilian forces, reward belligerents with power and wealth without accountability

conditions, and treat development funding as a reward for signing rather than as a binding commitment to the communities whose dispossession helped start the war. Beyond that, it must engage seriously with the question of how accountability is actually achieved. It must also stop treating Sudanese refugees and citizens seeking safety and education abroad as a burden to be managed[12] rather than as people with rights to be protected.

Sudanese civilian forces are doing what the conditions of war make possible, and that work matters enormously. The emergency response rooms that organized neighborhood-level survival in besieged cities, the resistance committees that have maintained organizational coherence through displacement and violence, the women's organizations operating across borders and displacement camps are the legitimate political representatives of the people whose future is being decided without them. In addition to this survival work, they can begin now, under war conditions and without waiting for a peace process that may not come soon, to think through what accountability must look like at the community level, to document crimes and perpetrators, to debate among victims and displaced communities what justice and reintegration require, and to build the frameworks that a serious post-war accountability process will need to draw on.

Sudan's struggle is not isolated, and Sudanese civilians cannot win it alone. The same powers that protect the UAE from accountability in Sudan enable the assault on Gaza and look away from Congo. Building solidarity across these struggles is a political necessity, because the international community will not be moved by Sudanese suffering alone but can be pressed by a broad coalition of people who recognize in Sudan's catastrophe the same logic they are fighting in their own contexts. That pressure, focused specifically on accountability for the perpetrators of this war and on the material conditions of a dignified life for its survivors, is what the moment requires.

notes

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