

SWP Research Paper

Volker Perthes

Sudan's Transition to War and the Limits of the UN's Good Offices



**Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
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- The United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) was established at the request of Sudan’s government to assist the country’s political “transition” towards domestic peace and democratic governance. Rather than being able to see its mandate through, the Mission witnessed a transition to the ongoing war between the country’s two military formations.
- UNITAMS’ good-offices function came into play in all three phases of the Mission’s lifespan – under the civilian-military partnership, under the military government, and in the first weeks of the war. Facilitation efforts became particularly relevant following the October 2021 military coup and after the conclusion of a Framework Political Agreement by the military and their civilian counterparts in December 2022.
- UNITAMS worked with a broad spectrum of civilian, “para-civilian” and military Sudanese stakeholders and with various regional and international partners. The establishment of the Tripartite Mechanism in cooperation with the African Union and the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) lent additional legitimacy to the efforts of all three organisations – and was at the same time a valuable learning exercise.
- One of the main lesson for international actors is not to underestimate the strength of actors who fear losing out in a transition process that the international community seeks to support.
- The UNITAMS experience demonstrates that even a small political mission can play an effective good-offices role, but it also shows the limits of this function – especially where military actors are set for war.

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Sudan's Transition to War and the Limits of the UN's Good Offices

Sudan has been the scene of ongoing internal warfare between two military formations since April 2023. This was not what the members of the Security Council and the international community expected when the Security Council decided in June 2020 to establish UNITAMS – the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan – to support the country's transition from a long period of authoritarian rule and internal wars to peace, democratic governance and economic recovery.

The short history of UNITAMS spans three distinct phases in Sudan's recent history: (1) a civilian-military partnership from the beginning of 2021, when the mission became operational, until the military coup of 25 October that year, followed by (2) an increasingly divided military government until 15 April 2023, when war broke out between the two military formations that had staged the 2021 coup, and (3) the first months of the war until the dissolution of the Mission on 29 February 2024.

The political transition which UNITAMS was supposed to support was aborted by the military takeover in October 2021. Various attempts by Sudanese actors to negotiate a return to civilian rule eventually failed, and neither Sudanese actors, nor UNITAMS and its regional partners nor other international players were able to prevent the outbreak of hostilities. The central question examined in this Research Paper is therefore the Mission's good offices function – its role in mediating or facilitating dialogue between conflicting actors and factions. I will also consider what lessons, if any, can be learned from Sudan's trajectory for UN efforts to better support political transitions.

The UNITAMS experience demonstrates that even a small political mission can play an effective good-offices role, but also indicates the limits of this function. For example, UNITAMS was successful where it brought a wide range of stakeholders together in a consultation process seeking a path out of the crisis following the military takeover. To some extent, it was even able to shape the environment that allowed such a process to happen. Also, UNITAMS and its African partners – the African Union (AU) and the subregional Intergovernmental Authority for Develop-

ment (IGAD) — effectively facilitated a broad-based political process agreed between the military and their civilian counterparts, to seek a political agreement that would end the country’s political impasse and restore civilian governance. This process was never concluded, not because of unresolved or unbridgeable differences between military and civilian participants, but as a result of the escalating conflict between the country’s two military formations and their respective leaderships.

Missions like UNITAMS could be better equipped and resourced to deal with unforeseen challenges that might threaten the political transition they are supposed to support. This is rather peripheral, however. One of the main lessons for the United Nations and member states willing to support post-war and post-dictatorship transitions is that too much enthusiasm for a successful revolution may lead one to underestimate the strength and determination of civilian, “para-civilian” and military actors who remain firmly opposed to such a transition.

In order for a UN mission to use its good-offices function effectively, continuous international support, not least from the Security Council, remains vital. Divisions in the Security Council impact the work of a Mission directly. And even with general support for its political and good-offices function, no UN political mission will be able to stop two armies that are intent on fighting each other if major powers with much greater leverage are not using their economic and political influence to dissuade them.

This Research Paper is written from a participant’s perspective. I was appointed as Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) for Sudan and head of UNITAMS in January 2021 and remained in that position until October 2023. The paper therefore draws substantially on my own recollections, and I readily admit that my personal involvement may influence my analysis.

Three Phases of UNITAMS*

Sudan was under military rule for close to sixty years between its independence in 1956 and the fall of Omar al-Bashir's military-Islamist regime in 2019, and in a state of civil war for much of that period. Bashir himself ruled for thirty years after leading a coup in 1989. South Sudan separated peacefully under his watch – following decades of civil war – through the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 and an independence referendum in 2011. Sudan's "other" civil war in Darfur, which had erupted and rapidly escalated in the early 2000s, was contained, not least through the deployment of a United Nations-African Union peacekeeping force (UNAMID) whose mandate ended in December 2020.¹

Bashir's fall from power followed a series of protests that began in December 2018, which the Sudanese refer to as the December Revolution. The military itself deposed and arrested Bashir in April 2019, after the strength of the protest and the weakness of the regime had become clear. The Transitional Military Council tried to monopolise power, but was thwarted by ongoing popular protests. Eventually a civilian-military partnership was negotiated between the Military Council and the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), a broad coalition of political parties, trade unions, and civil society organisations. This arrangement was codified in a Political Agreement and a Constitutional Document, signed in July and August 2019 respectively.² A civilian government was

formed under Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok and a Transitional Sovereignty Council established as collective head-of-state and chaired by the Commander-in-Chief of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), Lieutenant-General Abd al-Fattah al-Burhan. The commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Lieutenant-General Muhammad Hamdan Daglo – known as Hemedti – served as deputy chair of the Transitional Sovereignty Council (or "first vice president" as he was called in Council statements even though such a position did not officially exist according to the Constitutional Document). The RSF was a highly mobile formation established under the Bashir regime as a counter-insurgency force in Darfur; it drew most of its core leadership from Hemedti's own family and tribe.

The Political Agreement foresaw a 39-month transition period leading to elections and a fully civilian government. General Burhan was supposed to cede the chair of the Sovereignty Council to a civilian 21 months into the transition period. The "transition calendar" was restarted following the signing of the Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan (JPA) between the transitional government and most anti-regime rebel movements in October 2020.³

In June 2020, at the request of the Sudanese government, the UN Security Council decided to support Sudan's transition by establishing a political mission, the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS). The mission's mandate listed four strategic objectives, namely (1) to assist "the political transition [and] progress towards democratic governance", (2) to support peace processes and the implementation of peace agreements, (3) to assist

* An abridged version of this paper has been published under the title "Sudan's Transition to War", *Survival* 66, no. 4 (August/September 2024): 127–48.

1 See, among others, Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars: Old Wars and New Wars* (expanded 3rd edition) (Suffolk and Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2016). On Darfur see, among others, Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, *Darfur: A New History of a Long War* (London: Zed Books, 2008); on UNAMID: Ralph Mamiya et al., *Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations–African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID)* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2020).

2 For the Political Agreement of 17 July 2019 see <https://constitutionnet.org/vl/item/sudan-political-agreement>.

The Constitutional Declaration or Constitutional Charter was signed on 17 August 2019 and published in the *Official Gazette*: <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/sud191455.pdf>, English translation <https://constitutionnet.org/vl/item/sudan-constitutional-declaration-august-2019>.

3 For an analytical overview of Sudan's political developments since the fall of the Bashir regime see Gerrit Kurtz, *Power Relations in Sudan after the Fall of Bashir: From Revolution to War*, SWP Research Paper 5/2024 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2024).

Infobox 1: UNITAMS budget and staff

- UNITAMS was established under UNSC Resolution 2524 (2020) and closed down on 29 February 2024 under UNSC Resolution 2715 (2023).
- 2023 approved budget: US\$ 66.1 million (2021: US\$ 34 million)
- 2023 staffing: 356 national and international UN staff (approved); actual number employed around 320, plus up to 28 military observers and 42 international police officers (contributed by member states).

peacebuilding, civilian protection, and rule of law, and (4) to support “the mobilization of economic and development assistance and coordination of humanitarian assistance”.⁴ In January 2021, the author was appointed as SRSG for Sudan and head of UNITAMS.

The lifespan of UNITAMS can be roughly divided into three phases distinguished by rapidly shifting political environments: a civilian-military partnership until 25 October 2021 when the military staged a coup against their civilian partners; an increasingly divided military government until April 2023; and the war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) which also led to the dissolution of UNITAMS in February 2024. UNITAMS offered its good offices in all three phases, mainly as a facilitator or co-facilitator, particularly in the second, post-coup phase.

Only the first phase corresponded with the mission’s titular function of “transition assistance”.

Civilian-military partnership

Only the first phase, from the establishment of UNITAMS’ initial footprint in October 2020 until the military coup of 25 October 2021, corresponded with the mission’s titular function of “transition assistance”. In this phase UNITAMS set out to engage and build relationships with the authorities, political and societal actors, as well as regional and international players. Support for the government’s transition priorities included technical assistance for the implementation of a National Plan for the Protection of

⁴ United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Resolution 2524 (2020).

Infobox 2: Good offices

“Good offices” are a diplomatic tool to support peaceful settlement of a dispute or improve relations between parties in conflict. Good offices include mediation, facilitation, dialogues, advice, support for negotiations, and arbitration. In the UN context, reference is usually made to the “Secretary-General’s good offices”. The Secretary-General can exercise his good-offices function personally or through his representatives and envoys.

UNSC Resolution 2524 (2000), under which UNITAMS was established, refers explicitly to the Mission’s good offices in paragraphs 2 (i), 2 (ii), and 3. In Paragraph 2, it lists among the Mission’s objectives: “Assist, through good offices, the Sudanese transition, including national efforts to realise the objectives of the Constitutional Document”, and “Provide good offices and support to the Sudanese peace negotiations”. Paragraph 3 requests the appointment of a SRSG who “shall perform a good offices, advisory and advocacy role at the political level and coordinate efforts of the international community in support of the strategic objectives of the UNITAMS mandate”.

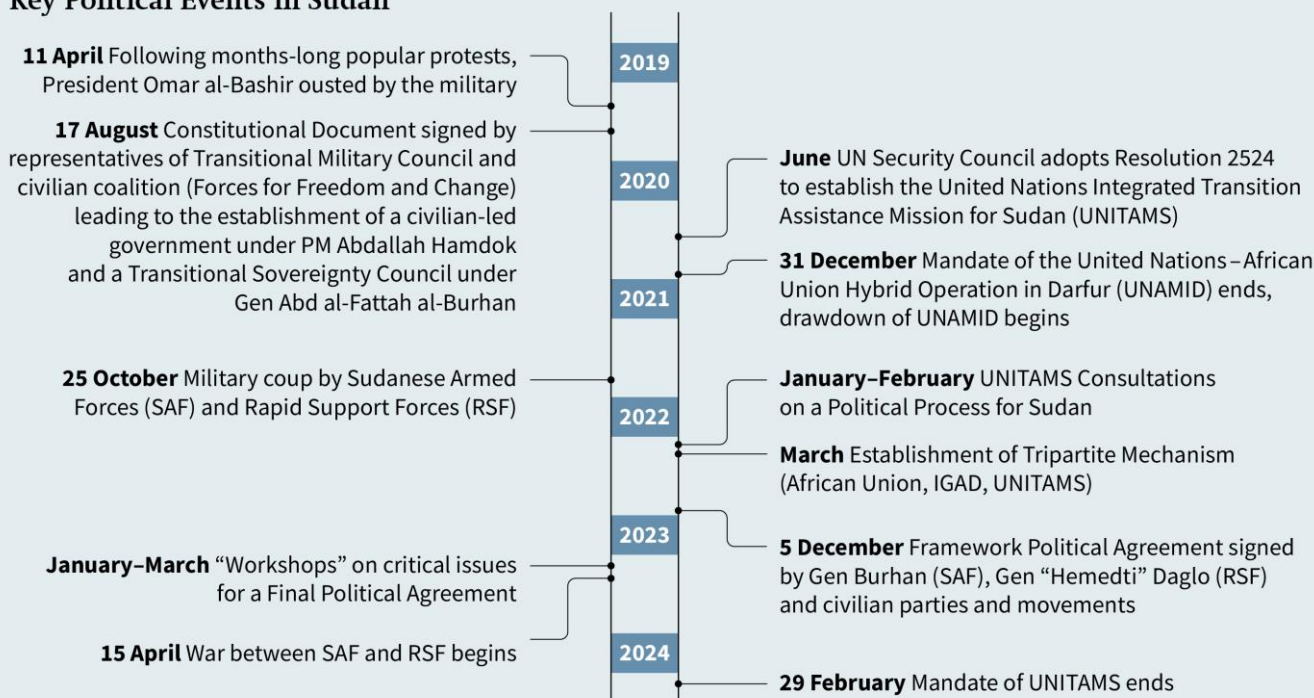
Civilians, legal reform, capacity-building for police and the judiciary, and mine action support. The Mission worked intensively with women’s groups and other civil society actors, and supported inter-community dialogues. Also, in close cooperation with the prime minister, the minister of finance and the international donor community, the Mission helped to establish a Sudan Partnership Forum as a would-be clearing house between the government and international donors. The Forum’s inaugural meeting in September 2021 was also its last, as it became defunct with the coup of October 2021.

UNITAMS was neither mandated nor equipped to provide physical protection for civilians. This was evident to the government, the main political actors and the armed groups or armed struggle movements (ASMs), but not necessarily to civilians, especially in Darfur, who suffered from repeated outbursts of violence and forced displacement. Many harboured unfounded expectations that UNITAMS would somehow take over the tasks of UNAMID, the former Chapter VII peacekeeping mission.⁵ Where UNAMID had more than 20,000 peace keepers at its peak, and still had 4,000 uniformed personnel and a budget

⁵ On UNAMID’s protection and peacebuilding functions see Mamiya et al., *Assessing the Effectiveness* (see note 1).

Figure 1

Key Political Events in Sudan



Source: Own Research

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exceeding one billion US\$ in its final year, the UNITAMS initial staffing plan foresaw only 21 police advisors working with the Sudanese Police Force in Khartoum and at three locations in Darfur. UNITAMS, as the Mission often had to explain, was there to support the state, mainly through advice and capacity-building, not to fill in for it as large peace-keeping missions do at times. UNITAMS leadership and the mission’s regional office in Darfur met regularly with community leaders, ASM representatives, and the authorities to de-escalate tensions, in particular around IDP camps where UNAMID had been able to offer a modicum of physical protection. But it had neither the mandate nor the resources to meet the communities’ expectations of protection from violent assaults by armed gangs and militias.

UNITAMS began exercising its good-offices function by cooperating with the government of South Sudan to facilitate a round of talks between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM)/North al-Hilu faction (the latter being one of the two main rebel groups that had not signed the JPA). Talks began in May, but were adjourned in June and never resumed, mainly due to the military’s takeover in Khartoum in October. The government of

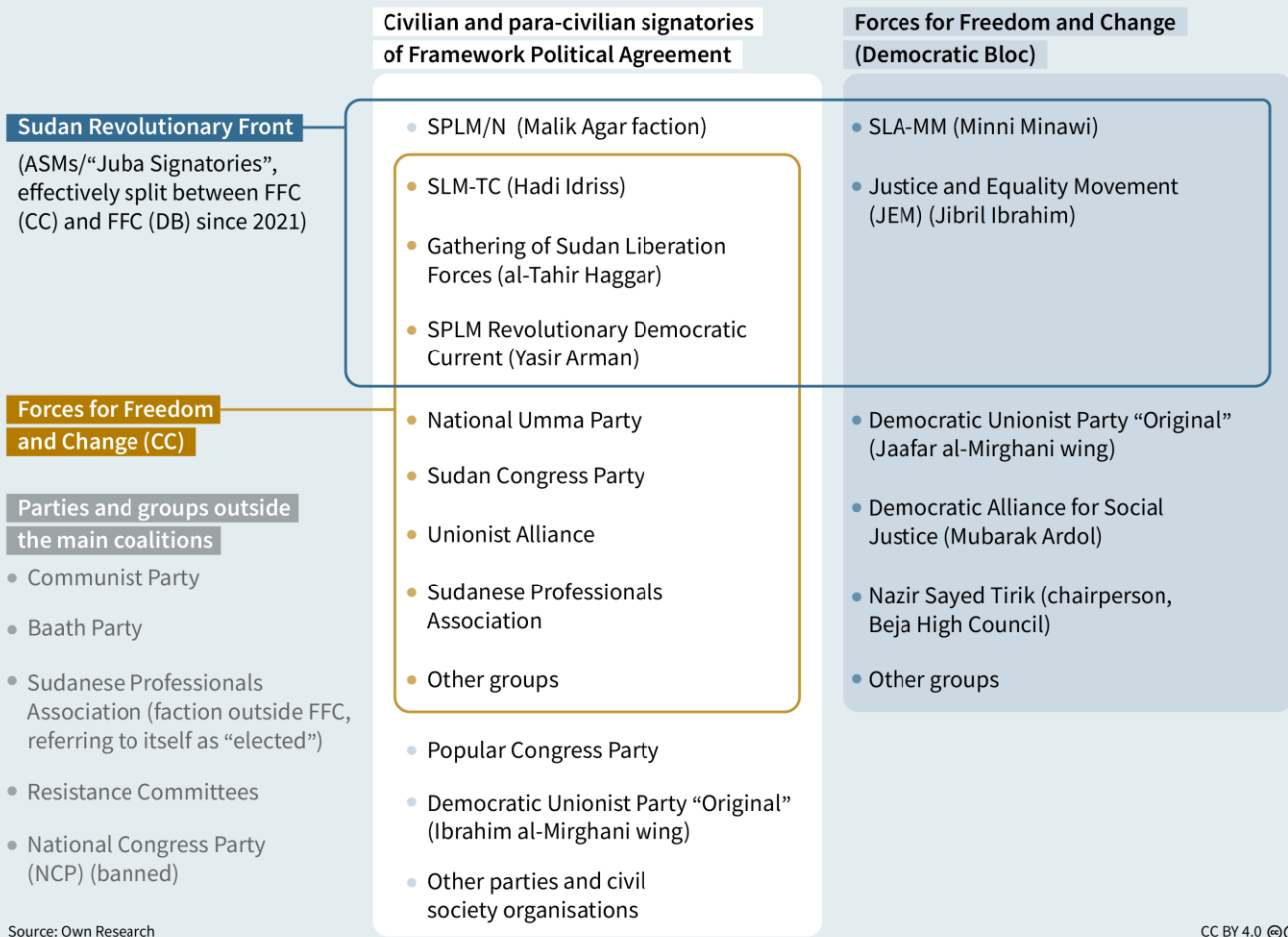
South Sudan led the talks, while UNITAMS supported them logistically, with expert advice and by contributing to their design, not least by securing the participation of a women’s delegation at the table.

Following a presidential decree on the establishment of the Permanent Ceasefire Committee (PCC) for Darfur and similar committees in the five Darfur states – which represented a practical step to implement the Darfur track of the JPA – and a request by the government to chair these committees, UNITAMS recruited the necessary military expertise and provided funding for the mechanisms as part of its mandated task to lend “scalable support” to the implementation of the JPA. The PCC served as a conflict prevention and trust-building mechanism between government forces – both SAF and RSF – on the one hand and the five main Darfur ASMs that had signed up to the JPA on the other.⁶ As such, it became one of the few successfully implemented and functioning elements of the JPA. But it could not fill the protection gap.

⁶ The term Armed Struggle Movement is used both for armed rebel groups in Sudan that had signed up to peace agreements, and those that had not.

Figure 2

Political Groups and Coalitions in Sudan, Following the Signing of the Framework Political Agreement on 5 December 2022



Good offices preceding the coup

The good offices function of the SRSG came increasingly into play in autumn 2021, even before the 25 October coup. On 21 September 2021 a failed coup attempt led by the commander of the Armoured Corps was quickly brought to an end by the Army. Both the civilian and the military leaderships blamed remnants of the Bashir regime for the attempt. But rather than demonstrating unity in defending constitutional order, the leaders of SAF and RSF on one hand, and the civilian leaders of the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) who formed the backbone of Prime Minister Hamdok’s cabinet, on the other, immediately began to attack each other publicly. The military accused the civilian government of mismanagement and criticised civilian politicians for squabbling and disparaging the military; some

civilian leaders accused the military leadership of intending to bring down the government, and the prime minister called for a reform of the military and security structures.⁷ While Burhan and Hemedti made public efforts to display unity, even appearing together at military installations, the FFC split openly into two blocs: the FFC 1 or FFC-Central Committee (FFC CC), and the so-called FFC 2 or FFC-National Charter (NC) which later reconstituted itself as FFC-Democratic Bloc (DB). FFC 1 was led by the four main political parties in the Hamdok cabinet, FFC 2 by two of the Juba signatories: the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA MM) of Minni Minawi, who had recently been

⁷ “Sudan Military, Politicians Exchange Accusations over Coup Attempt”, *Dabanga Online*, 23 September 2021, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-military-politicians-exchange-accusations-over-coup-attempt>.

Map

Sudan: Administrative Divisions



appointed Governor of Darfur, and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) under Jibril Ibrahim, who served as minister of finance.⁸

⁸ The FFC 1 continued to speak of themselves simply as FFC, but were generally referred to as FFC (CC) over time. The other bloc was generally referred to as FFC 2, but objected to the name on the grounds that “2” suggested that they were a breakaway. The second coalition appeared under different names, and was joined by a number of additional parties and smaller militant or political factions over time. Minawi’s SLA and Jibril’s JEM remained at its core, however. In the following I refer to the first bloc as FFC (CC). For the second bloc, I use the names it used itself: FFC (NC) until November 2022 and FFC (DB) thereafter. After the war began both blocs remained more or less intact, and opposed to one another. Both initially declared themselves neutral, until the FFC (DB)

renounced its neutrality and took a pro-SAF stance. The FFC (CC) became the core of the Coalition of Civic Democratic Forces (Taqaddum) formed in October 2023. In May 2024, the FFC (DB) groups, the SPLM/N (Malik Agar faction) and some former NCP affiliates, including notorious (and UN-sanctioned) former Janjaweed leader Musa Hilal, formed a new pro-SAF political bloc under the name of Sudan Charter Forces (SCF).

tending parties in Libya.⁹ In mid-October 2021, Minawi's and Jibril's movements and some smaller groups staged a six-day sit-in in front of the Presidential Palace to protest against the Hamdok government. During that same period, the Chief of the Beja High Council had his tribesmen blockade the harbour in Port Sudan and the main roads to the rest of the country, causing serious supply problems. Participants in both protests called for the civilian government, in particular the FFC politicians, to be removed and for General Burhan to take over. Little wonder that the other side of the political spectrum denounced these moves as being instigated by the military.

Good offices were encouraged by all sides, often with the expectation that UNITAMS would carry messages to the others.

“Good offices” in this atmosphere included calls for de-escalation, in parallel or together with individual political leaders and public figures, and quite some shuttling between the military, the prime minister, politicians, other civilian actors, and ASM leaders. This was openly encouraged by all sides, often with the expectation that UNITAMS would carry messages to the others. Among other things, I appealed to political leaders in the FFC to support a last-minute initiative by Prime Minister Hamdok who proposed a committee to defuse the crisis, chaired by himself with two representatives from the FFC (CC), two from the military, as well as Minawi and Jibril for the FFC (NC). While the military and the FFC (NC) accepted and nominated their representatives, Hamdok's initiative was effectively shot down by more radical elements in the FFC (CC) who were convinced that a planned mass demonstration in support of civilian rule would deter the military from moving. That demonstration, on 21 October, did indeed show impressive popular support for the civilian government, and far outnumbered the crowds which the FFC (NC) had mobilised for the Palace sit-in. But it certainly did not soften the attitude of the military leaders.

At the same time, I appealed to the military leadership to refrain from any possible coup plans. This

included a clear message that the UN and other international actors would call a coup a coup, and warnings about the consequences that such a takeover would likely involve. While Burhan told me (and, reportedly, the visiting US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa) that he was not planning a coup,¹⁰ other generals did not exclude the possibility at all. On 24 October, one of them responded affirmatively when I asked whether the military would accept an invitation from UNITAMS to bring the various parties together. But, he added, there weren't many days left for such an initiative. In fact, as I found out the following morning, there wasn't even one day.

While I was shuttling in Khartoum as SRSG, the director of the UNITAMS Office of Political Affairs joined a government delegation to the East for talks with the Beja High Council which was continuing to block the roads. Among other things, UNITAMS had offered to support a special donors' conference for the East, which was to be hosted by the prime minister. An initial agreement was supposed to be signed on 25 October. But this did not happen, and further talks were suspended once news of the coup had broken. The blockade in the East was also swiftly lifted.

Coup and military government

The military seized power on 25 October 2021, under the leadership of Generals Burhan and Hemedti. The prime minister was taken into custody in the Presidential Guesthouse (Burhan's residence), and later placed under house arrest in his own residence. A number of ministers and FFC (CC) leaders were detained. Internet and mobile phone communications were cut. Burhan declared a state of emergency, dissolved the cabinet and the Sovereignty Council, and suspended key provisions of the Constitutional Document, particularly those referring to the FFC. Claiming that the military had moved to prevent civil war, Burhan also declared that the military would hand power to an elected civilian government, adding that he envisioned elections for summer 2023. Over the following days and weeks, most undersecretaries and governors were sacked, along with an increasing number of senior officials.

⁹ Gerrit Kurtz, *The Spoilers of Darfur: Sudan's Protracted Political Crisis and the Intensifying Violence in Darfur are Closely Connected*, SWP Comment 53/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2022).

¹⁰ “‘They Lied’: Inside the Frantic Days Leading to Sudan's Coup”, *New York Times*, 29 October 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/29/world/africa/sudan-coup-general.html>.

The international community largely denounced the takeover. The Security Council issued a statement calling for the restoration of the civilian government,¹¹ and the African Union's Peace and Security Committee (PSC) suspended Sudan's membership. Most donor countries decided to suspend development assistance but maintain humanitarian support.

Resistance against the coup began immediately, mainly on the streets as resistance committees – which had already played a role in overthrowing the Bashir regime – called for spontaneous and subsequently more organised mass protests. In the first months after the coup, protest marches were held several times a week both in the capital and in the provinces. Military and police sought to suppress these protests, often with deadly violence. By the end of 2022, at least 114 protesters had died, mainly by gunshot or injuries caused by tear gas canisters.¹² At the same time, the general security situation deteriorated all over the country, and particularly in the peripheries, partly because both SAF and RSF withdrew forces from the provinces to quell protests in the capital, and, at a later stage, to contain one another.

Soon after the coup, various Sudanese groups and individuals offered to mediate or launched initiatives seeking to resolve the political conflict. This included a “Group of the Wise” – respected public figures accepted as go-betweens by both Burhan and Hamdok. Its proposals failed to gain traction with the military, though. Another group worked with strong support from the military, specifically from General Abdulrahim Daglo, Hemedti's brother and deputy commander of the RSF, and included representatives from the Juba signatories, political figures with strong ties to the RSF or the SAF, as well as one or two confidants of the detained prime minister. It managed to work out a draft agreement that the military accepted, it was signed in a hastily convened ceremony on 21 November by both General Burhan and Prime Minister Hamdok, who was released from his house arrest for that purpose. While the 21 November Agreement confirmed that Hamdok was legally still the

prime minister, it also acknowledged the “decisions” taken by the commander-in-chief, i.e., Burhan, on 25 October. The prime minister was to form a technocratic government. UNITAMS, like other representatives of the regional and international community, did not endorse the agreement, but welcomed it cautiously as a potential “step towards comprehensive dialogue and a return to constitutional order.”¹³ The agreement was rejected by the FFC (CC), by the resistance committees, and by large parts of public opinion, who saw it as legitimising the coup. Prime Minister Hamdok soon realised that he had lost the support of “the street”, and that neither the FFC (CC) nor those who had negotiated the November Agreement were helping him to form a consensual government. Nor did he have any influence on appointments – of a new chief justice or attorney general, for example – or the way the security forces dealt with the protests. Hamdok resigned on 2 January 2022. No new prime minister and cabinet were appointed. General Burhan unilaterally appointed a new Sovereignty Council with himself in the chair and General Hemedti as his deputy,¹⁴ remained the commander-in-chief, and effectively became the head of government too.

The 25 October coup immediately changed the context and planning assumptions under which UNITAMS was working. The political environment was now marked by high tension, violence and a sharp general deterioration of the economic, social and human-rights situation. The government with which the mission had worked had been dismissed. Only cabinet members representing the ASMs/Juba signatories stayed in their position. Most ministries were led by acting under-secretaries or acting ministers appointed by General Burhan. But there was, as even Burhan complained in private settings, “no government”. Partly out of the need to find experienced substitutes for the officials he had dismissed from the administration and the justice system, Burhan recruited among figures from the Bashir

¹¹ “Security Council Press Statement on Sudan”, press release, 28 October 2021, <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14678.doc.htm>.

¹² Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), “Sudan: Political Process to Form a Transitional Civilian Government and Shifting Disorder Trends”, 14 April 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/04/14/sudan-situation-update-april-2023-political-process-to-form-a-transitional-civilian-government-and-the-shift-in-disorder-trends/>.

¹³ “Cautiously Welcoming Power-Sharing Agreement in Sudan, Special Representative Tells Security Council Constitutional Declaration Must Be Respected”, United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 10 December 2021, <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14730.doc.htm>.

¹⁴ The other army generals in the Council (Kabbashi, al-Atta, and Jaber) and the representatives of the ASMs/Juba signatories (Malik Agar, Hadi Idriss, al-Tahir Hagggar) retained their positions.

era and Bashir's officially banned National Congress Party (NCP).

UNITAMS functions and good offices

The coup ended the military-civilian partnership and effectively aborted the “political transition”. UNITAMS, as the “transition assistance mission”, had to be refocus its priorities. The mission’s “good offices” became more pertinent. In the first weeks after the coup, this mainly meant addressing detentions and other civil rights violations. In January 2022, UNITAMS launched a six-week exercise of “Consultations on a Political Process”. In March, UNITAMS, the African Union and the subregional Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) established a Tripartite Mechanism (TM; often also referred to as Trilateral Mechanism) which engaged in various attempts over the following months to facilitate or encourage dialogue between the military and civilians. From December 2022, at the invitation of its military and civilian signatories, the Tripartite Mechanism facilitated a series of follow-up workshops to the so-called Framework Political Agreement that sought to re-establish civilian governance. During this process, frictions between the two military formations took an increasingly dangerous turn, and UNITAMS once again became actively involved in efforts to defuse tensions, together with other international actors and Sudanese civilian leaders.

In an “integrated mission setting”, UNITAMS and the UN agencies developed a common approach on the UN’s priorities following the coup.

Even though the coup and the ensuing crisis dominated domestic developments and Sudan’s relations with its external environment, UNITAMS’ work in this phase was not focused solely on political processes. The mission continued to work with relevant federal and state institutions, the military, the police, the judiciary, prosecutors and others, mostly on a technical level, to address human rights, protection of civilians and the prevention of sexual violence. UNITAMS outreach to women’s organisations, civil society, activists, and local communities increased somewhat, and the mission supported individual peace-building projects in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile State. It mobilised resources and recruited personnel to support the establishment of,

and then to chair, the Permanent Ceasefire Committee for Darfur and the state-level ceasefire committees in Darfur’s five states. In what the UN calls an “integrated mission setting”, UNITAMS and the UN agencies, funds and programmes in Sudan developed a common approach on the UN’s work and priorities following the coup and the disruption of donor funding. UNITAMS also served as a hub for international policy discussion on Sudan, not least so by convening regular meetings among the “Friends of Sudan”.

Concerning the good-offices function in a stricter sense, military leaders and most civilian actors expressed their expectation that UNITAMS would somehow help to find ways to resolve the crisis. FFC (CC) leaders also insisted on a “strong backstage role” of the United States which, they believed, would ultimately have much more leverage than the UN or other international actors.

I and other UNITAMS staff maintained close contact with Prime Minister Hamdok during and after his house arrest, with General Burhan, and with other military, political, and ASM leaders, civil society, women’s and youth groups, activists, academics, businesspeople, and others. While most of these interlocutors explicitly favoured UNITAMS’ efforts to de-escalate and explore ways to return to constitutional order, parts of the resistance committees and many social media activists rejected any political process involving the military, and accordingly criticised UNITAMS and the SRSG for their contacts with the generals.

Much of the mission’s initial post-coup engagement with the generals was about releasing the prime minister and other detainees, and ending the violent repression of protests. We explained that as far as we and the international community were concerned, Hamdok was still the prime minister and should be allowed to resume his duties. We also left no doubt that UNITAMS — in line with the Security Council’s press statement — would seek to support a restoration of civilian government and constitutional order: in other words, to undo the coup.

By the end of December 2021, it had become clear that the 21 November Agreement was not going anywhere, nor were other ongoing domestic initiatives to reach agreement among the political factions. I suggested to both Hamdok and Burhan that UNITAMS should initiate consultations with a wide range of Sudanese stakeholders to begin a political process and find ways out of the crisis. Burhan and the military leadership were hesitant, but eventually gave their

assent following Hamdok's resignation and an unsuccessful attempt to find a new, widely accepted prime minister. Without this, such engagement within the country would have been simply impossible, particularly under state-of-emergency conditions.

Relations with the military were not always easy, but remained largely professional and cordial. Burhan and Hemedti realised that UNITAMS would continue its work according to its mandate, and would continue to deal with them both in their official functions as head and deputy head of the Sovereignty Council and as the de-facto executive authority, rather than cutting relations with them as some activists demanded. They were also aware that UNITAMS remained mandated and committed to support Sudan's political transition, or a return to it, which effectively required the coup to be unwound. Burhan initially insisted that he had not led a coup but simply "removed the civilian component" from the government. Only towards the end of 2022, in the context of negotiations on the Framework Agreement, did he privately say that a "return to transition" would now be possible and could, if one so wished, be called "reversing the coup."

"Consultations on a Political Process"

The UNITAMS-led "Consultations on a Political Process for Sudan" began on 10 January 2022 and became an intense six-week process with some 110 meetings and over 800 interlocutors in Khartoum and various provincial cities. Process design was supported by the UN's Mediation Support Unit. Meetings, usually lasting two to three hours, were held with representatives from civil society, government, political parties, armed movements, women's groups, resistance committees, youth, the business community, nomadic groups, internally displaced persons (IDPs), Sudanese diaspora organisations, and other state and non-state actors. The military chose to respond in written form to the questions used to structure the consultations. UNITAMS also received some eighty additional written contributions. Diplomats from donor countries and the EU, regional states, the African Union, and IGAD were kept abreast of the process in various regular formats, but were not present in the meetings. Individual embassies launched related activities, such as a youth-focused opinion poll whose results could later be compared with those of the "Consultations".

The success of the "Consultation" lay in helping to form a clearer picture of what people actually thought.

UNITAMS made it clear before and during the process that it would be coming up with a "solution" to the crisis. Instead, the objective of the process was to support a Sudanese solution through a cumulative inclusive conversation that could serve as basis for further dialogue. The success thus lay in the almost universal agreement of individuals and groups from across the political and societal spectrum and from all parts of the country to participate – thereby helping to form a clearer picture of what people who were prepared to engage actually thought about the situation and the way forward. This included many groups that still refused to talk to one another. The exercise was not structured like an opinion poll, and UNITAMS refrained from quantifying agreement and disagreement. But the summary report that UNITAMS released in February 2022 identified areas of consensus and divergence, as well as common concerns. It proved, as one prominent intellectual wrote, that the Sudanese "agree on more than they are aware of".¹⁵ There was a strong consensus that violence needed to stop, a strong demand to lift the state of emergency, a strong consensus that the Constitutional Document needed amendments, wide-ranging respect for the military as an institution, but also a great wish to see them outside of politics, an overwhelming consensus that all military and paramilitary forces should be under one unified professional command, and no small measure of criticism of the political parties and the armed struggle movements (ASMs). On the basis of the consultations, the report proposed a list of priority issues for an ensuing political process, notably military-civilian relations, an accepted transitional government, legislative and oversight bodies, and more inclusive political participation.¹⁶

The Tripartite Mechanism

The "Consultations" remained a point of reference for subsequent efforts to begin a political process. In

¹⁵ Shafia Khidr, "Sudan and How to Prevent It from Gliding into a No-state Situation" (Arabic), *Al-Rakuba*, 4 April 2022, <https://bit.ly/3TyOKMF>.

¹⁶ "Consultations on a Political Process for Sudan", UNITAMS (online), <https://unitams.unmissions.org/en/consultations-political-process-sudan>.

February, after some procrastination from the military, high-level AU and IGAD delegations were eventually able to visit Khartoum. They met with Burhan, Hemedti and other stakeholders, and signalled their intent to contribute actively to a political solution. Following discussions in Khartoum and at headquarters level, the AU, IGAD, and UNITAMS formed what came to be called the Tripartite or Trilateral Mechanism (TM) with the explicit aim of facilitating a process that would help Sudan to “return to constitutional order”. The latter was a key demand not least for the AU, whose Political and Security Committee (PSC) had suspended Sudan’s AU membership after the coup and would only readmit the country once civilian government was restored.

The structure of the TM came with political benefits and with challenges. The active involvement of the AU, IGAD, and the UN lent it legitimacy – Sudan, after all, was member of all three organisations. Military and civilian actors alike had, at various junctures, requested their support in facilitating efforts to find a way out of the crisis, and it was difficult to denounce the trilateral efforts as a form of “Western” interference as some, in particular hard-line Islamists, did with regard to the UN.

Compared to other UN operations, UNITAMS was a relatively small mission. But with some three hundred national and international staff on the ground and a functioning headquarters it was much better equipped than AU and IGAD whose respective Special Envoys had to rely on a very small number of advisors. Consequently, the actual work of the Tripartite Mechanism depended largely on UNITAMS staff, resources and logistics. Despite this structural imbalance, all three organisations maintained that the mechanism was led jointly and equally, without a “chief facilitator”. This posed some practical problems: Trust had to be built between the three envoys and their staff; different perspectives, not least on process design, had to be reconciled or, where differences persisted, tolerated. More importantly, Sudanese actors did not necessarily treat the TM as a single mechanism. Many politicians, civil society representatives and activists, and some of the military leaders, preferred to deal with the one or other organisation, or the one or other of the envoys, rather than all three, and some worked actively to play the organisations off against each other. After some teething

troubles during the first few months,¹⁷ the three organisations managed to shield themselves against such manoeuvres and operate as a visibly cohesive mechanism.

The TM began its joint activities with a round of meetings with individual stakeholder groups, including Burhan and his fellow generals in the Sovereignty Council as the de-facto authority, political parties, armed struggle movements, civil society groups, women’s organisations, resistance committees and academics. The joint message of the three organisations was that they were present and mandated to facilitate a political process, but not – unless explicitly asked – to mediate. And that half a year after the coup, with no functioning government and a deteriorating human rights, security, and economic situation, there was an urgent need for the Sudanese to find a way out of the crisis.

Some of the more assertive players reminded us from time to time that we were “only facilitators, not mediators”.

Sudanese stakeholders were generally on board with the TM’s “facilitating” role. Some of the more assertive players (not only the military) reminded us from time to time that we were “only facilitators, not mediators”. This was not so much a conceptual distinction between different “good-offices” functions as a warning that what the TM proposed for the design, participants or subject matter of a dialogue would not necessarily be accepted. The military – with no significant differences between Burhan, Hemedti and the three other generals on the Sovereignty Council – insisted that the problem that had caused their takeover and needed to be solved was not between military and civilians, but between the civilians themselves. The TM, they said, should therefore facilitate a political process between the civilians, particularly the leaders of the FFC (CC) and the FFC (NC), as well as other relevant parties and movements outside those two blocs. The FFC (CC) was not in principle opposed to talking to or negotiating with the military: in fact, both Burhan and Hemedti were already holding informal conversations with individ-

¹⁷ “AU Has Not Withdrawn from Sudan Trilateral Mechanism”, *Dabanga Online*, 22 June 2022, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/au-has-not-withdrawn-from-sudan-trilateral-mechanism>.

ual FFC (CC) leaders. But FFC (CC) leaders regarded the FCC (NC) as supporters of the coup, not as legitimate and equal representatives of the civilian component. The FFC (NC) had no issue with calling the coup a coup. But the coup, they argued, was not the problem. Instead, the root causes of Sudan's conflicts needed to be addressed, not least the exclusion of the periphery by the Khartoum elite.

Generally, civilian and para-civilian leaders and activists all talked to one another in different formats, but mutual antipathies represented a challenge for efforts to bring about a political process. A successful initiative launched by the vice-chancellors (presidents) of Sudan's state universities to bring representatives from parties, movements, and resistance committees together was effectively shot down by General Burhan summarily dismissing all the vice-chancellors. The resistance committees and some political parties and civil society organisations that followed their lead had come out with the "Three Nos": "No negotiations, no partnership, no legitimacy" (with or for the military or those supporting them). At Five young resistance committee activists walked out of an *iftar* organised by the Tripartite Mechanism when they saw the FFC (NC) representatives in the room.¹⁸ Some of the resistance committees also refused to meet UNITAMS, at least publicly, arguing that by talking to the military the UN was legitimising the coup. Others appreciated being involved. The resistance committees actually comprised a broad range of political orientations. Most of them increasingly accepted that others, notably political parties and leaders, would negotiate with the military, particularly about a return to civilian government.

AU, IGAD, UNITAMS, and the international community at large agreed that there would eventually have to be negotiations between the military and civilians.

AU, IGAD, and UNITAMS, and the international community at large, agreed and maintained that if there was to be a return to constitutional order, there would eventually have to be negotiations between the military leadership and civilian stakeholders. And the military, if it wanted the TM to exercise its good offices, would have to provide a conducive environ-

¹⁸ The *iftar* is the fast-breaking evening meal during Ramadan.

ment for any political process, not least by lifting the state of emergency. Other international actors also pressed this issue. At the end of May, Burhan finally announced an end to the state of emergency: to create, as an official statement put it, "the atmosphere for a fruitful and meaningful dialogue".¹⁹ The use of deadly force against protesters and arbitrary detentions did not end, but decreased.

The Tripartite Mechanism used this opening to invite military and civilian stakeholders to "Preparatory Talks" on a political process. The first – and only – plenary session was held on 8 June 2022 in the Rotana Hotel. It was attended by a military delegation led by Generals Hemedti and Shams al-Din Kabbashi, as well as by the FFC (NC), the Sudan Revolutionary Front (ASMs/Juba signatories), the Popular Congress Party (an Islamist party that had split from the Bashir regime), the Democratic Unionist Party (a traditional Sudanese party outside the FFC), and a delegation led by Tijani Sisi (a Darfur leader who had signed an earlier peace treaty with the Bashir regime). It was boycotted by the FFC (CC), the Communist Party and civil society groups. The Popular Congress Party (PCP) initially objected to the participation of the military but decided to participate nonetheless and express their anti-military positions in the meeting. A representative of the resistance committees attended the opening, reaffirmed their "Three No's", and left.

The FFC (CC) announced their boycott two days before the meeting. They explained that they were "unhappy with" the TM's approach, particularly with the invitation of "supporters of the coup" who, in their opinion, should not be part of such talks, at least not at this stage. They felt that the "key stakeholders" – which in their opinion meant themselves and the military – should decide who else participated. Also, as one FFC (CC) leader said, a solution would eventually have to be found between "us and the military."

Those in attendance agreed with the facilitators that the FFC (CC) would have to be at the table if the process was to be meaningful. Efforts over the following weeks to find a formula under which the FFC (CC) or its main parties would join proved fruitless. Without them, another plenary meeting in this format would have looked very much like a negotiation between the military and their supporters.

¹⁹ "Sudan Lifts State of Emergency Imposed Since Coup", VOA, 29 May 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/sudan-lifts-state-of-emergency-imposed-since-coup/6594476.html>.

Competing initiatives and military-civilian talks

In the meantime, military and FFC (CC) leaders had been meeting in other formats, and continued to do so. Just a day after the TM-facilitated “Preparatory Talks” plenary, the US and Saudi embassies organised the first of a series of meetings with representatives of the military leadership and the FFC (CC), held at the Saudi ambassador’s residence. While the TM welcomed the fact that the military and the FFC (CC) were now officially talking, the Saudi/US-sponsored meetings also created an alternative to the talks the TM had launched. This drew angry reactions, especially from the FFC (NC).

Both the military leaders and the FFC (CC) told us that they intended to reach an understanding on a roadmap for a process that they would then ask the TM to facilitate, and on key substantive issues such as the division of competencies between the military and a civilian government in a new “transitional” set-up. According to interlocutors from both sides, they made progress, but the gaps between their respective positions remained wide. After the violent repression of an anti-military demonstration on 30 June, which left nine demonstrators dead and some six hundred injured, the FFC (CC) decided to pull out of the US-Saudi-sponsored talks. Two days later, the military informed both the TM and the US and Saudi ambassadors that they would no longer be talking with the civilian side and were therefore withdrawing from both the TM-facilitated “Preparatory Talks” and the Saudi/US-sponsored meetings. Both forums had thereby lost their purpose. On 4 July, General Burhan gave a televised speech in which he informed the public of the decision to withdraw from military-civilian talks. This should, he said, allow civilian forces to agree among themselves on a “government of independent national competencies”. If that happened, the military would accept such a government, the Sovereignty Council (which he led) would be dissolved, and SAF and RSF would form a Supreme Council of the Armed Forces which would be responsible for security and defence “in agreement with the government”.²⁰

Burhan’s announcement was met with great scepticism, especially in the FFC (CC) and other opposition groups, and some speculation as to why he was suddenly speaking of relinquishing power, or at least a substantial part of it. Many suspected some kind of

subterfuge. More likely, however, Burhan and the other generals in the Sovereignty Council had realised that they were stuck and needed a way out of the impasse they had created. Their takeover had not resolved any problems, they had not been able to form a government, the achievements of the Hamdok government, particularly the upcoming debt relief, were at risk, and the economy was increasingly in dire straits. In his 4 July speech, Burhan acknowledged that the country was in a crisis that threatened its unity. Differences between Burhan and Hemedti also became more apparent, not least in direct conversations with each of them.

The military also explicitly asked the TM to launch a civilian-civilian dialogue rather than continuing attempts to facilitate talks between the military and the civilian spectrum. The TM declined, making it clear that the military had come to power through a coup. If it wanted a negotiated solution, it would have to talk to the civilians. At the same time, the Mechanism did continue to shuttle between civilian stakeholder groups, encouraging them to speak to one another and to treat Burhan’s announcement as an opportunity – or at least as a test of the military’s preparedness to do what political parties, civil society and resistance committees had called for: to withdraw the military from politics and accept a civilian government.

Burhan considered the Bar Association’s process to be the most broad-based, and used its Constitutional Draft as the basis for an “amended” document.

Whatever these forces thought of Burhan’s announcement, it changed the political dynamics. A number of initiatives emerged over the following weeks, all aimed at finding some form of consensus on a new “transition phase” and the formation of a civilian government. The most successful initiative was one launched by the Sudanese Bar Association (SBA). It proposed drawing up a new constitution in a month-long series of workshops and expert meetings involving the main political parties, ASMs, civil society representatives and jurists. UNITAMS and one or two international NGOs provided limited expert advice during these deliberations. Other initiatives and plans for a new transitional set-up were launched by a group of university professors, by the Sudanese Revolutionary Front, by the FFC (NC) (which had

²⁰ “Al-Burhan Speech 4 July 2022”, <https://redress.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Al-Burhan-Speech-4.7.2022.pdf>.

withdrawn from the Bar Association's initiative after the opening session), by an alliance led by the Communist Party and resistance committees, and by various individuals and groupings with strong ties to the old regime who were brought together by Tayiib al-Jid, a NCP-affiliated Sufi Sheikh.

The military was initially sceptical about the SBA's process, not least because of the rather dominant role played by the FFC (CC) and other more liberal voices. Burhan even endorsed Sheikh al-Jid's "Call of the People of Sudan for National Consensus", which would have left the Army leader in charge.²¹ Eventually, however, Burhan and the other generals in the Sovereignty Council considered the Bar Association's process to be the most broad-based, and used the Constitutional Draft it had produced as the basis for an "amended" document of their own. On 24 October, Burhan and Hemedti presented this document to the TM and the Quad ambassadors (United States, Saudi Arabia, UAE and United Kingdom), insisting that it should no longer be referred to as the "SBA draft", but as a "National Document". It became their starting position for further closed direct negotiations which both Burhan and Hemedti held individually with a group of FFC (CC) leaders – Khalid Omar Yousuf, Taha Osman and a few others – throughout November. The FFC (NC), now re-established as the FFC Democratic Bloc (DB), with the addition of some other parties and groups,²² rejected the military's amended SBA draft as a basis for further talks. This was somewhat ironic given that the dominant forces in this bloc were supposedly the closest partners of the military leadership; they had contributed to the overthrow of the Hamdok government and continued to hold government positions. Unsurprisingly, though, they feared that Burhan and Hemedti might sacrifice them for the sake of agreement with the FFC (CC). They also began to construct a narrative according to

which the Tripartite Mechanism was biased towards the FFC and the military.

The TM and the diplomatic community also regarded the SBA process as the most inclusive of the Sudanese initiatives. While regretting the non-participation of the FFC (DB) and some other players, and with both the military and the FFC now prepared to hold further talks on the basis of one text, the TM encouraged these other parties to engage on this basis, and supported similar efforts by non-partisan actors, in particular a group of local businesspeople led by Anthony Hajjar, who had already had played a mediating role between the military and the civilians in 2019. While the TM remained outside the room during direct talks, it kept shuttling, collectively and individually, on the envoy and working levels, in order to help narrow down differences by repeatedly discussing what military and political leaders presented as their respective positions or "non-negotiables."

Throughout November, the FFC (CC) leaders became more transparent on where they were in their ongoing talks, as did Burhan and Hemedti. It became clear that they were coming closer to an understanding which, in their view, should also be acceptable to any other political forces who wanted a stake in a future government. No texts were released, but details of a possible understanding and remaining differences were discussed publicly. Human rights and civil society groups were concerned that the generals would be given immunity; political forces outside the FFC (CC) were concerned that they would not be given a say in choosing the future head of state, the prime minister, or ministers. The TM was asked to obtain the consent of other forces, but politely declined: If the military and the FFC (CC) wanted these other forces – primarily the FFC (DB) – to be part of an agreement, they would need to give them a chance to participate in the discussions. The TM would continue to talk to all parties, and was prepared to (and did indeed) inject ideas or bridging proposals on subject matter.²³ But the UN, AU, and IGAD would not be able to sell an understanding of which they were no part. The generals accepted this, but blamed the FFC (CC) for their unwillingness to involve the FFC (DB) on equal footing, rather than making an effort of their own to bring this bloc, who were considered their allies, into the fold.

21 "Burhan Welcomes the 'Sudan People's Call': A New Initiative to End the Political Crisis" (in Arabic, author's translation), *al-Jazeera Net*, 31 July 2022, <https://bit.ly/3XKBaIp>; "Al-Jid Proposed It ... Burhan Announces His Acceptance of the Initiative for National Consensus" (in Arabic, author's translation), *al-Tabia Net*, 31 July 2022, <https://bit.ly/3B8Qshx>.

22 Notably the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) "Original" (called "Original" or "al-Asl" in Arabic because a number of split-off factions continued to use the name DUP) under the leadership of Jaafar al-Mighrani, and Nazir Tirik (a Nazir is a state-appointed tribal leader), the head of the Beja High Council who had organised the blockade of Port Sudan a year before.

23 Among other things, UNITAMS presented a paper on international experiences with security-sector reform.

The Framework Political Agreement

On 2 December, Burhan, Hemedti and the signatories of the SBA Constitutional Draft informed the representatives of the TM, the Quad, Norway, the EU, and EU member states that they had reached a basic agreement. Three days later, Burhan, Hemedti and a host of political parties and groups in the FFC, along with others from outside the FFC, several ASMs and civil society organisations signed the Framework Political Agreement (FPA). The FPA stipulated a return to civilian governance with a civilian as non-executive head of state instead of a Sovereignty Council. The military were to be represented in a Security and Defence Council chaired by the prime minister. Details on five critical issues would need further discussion in order to reach a Final Agreement on the basis of which the military would hand over to the new president, and a government would be formed.²⁴ The Tripartite Mechanism was asked to facilitate the discussions on these issues.

The TM and the diplomatic community were present at the signing ceremony and congratulated the parties on their success in reaching an agreement. The African Union, the Security Council and most other international players welcomed it as a major step towards a return to civilian-led transition.²⁵ The officially banned NCP and other groups and individuals associated with the erstwhile Bashir-regime denounced the agreement and began campaigning against it. The leaders of the FFC (DB) declined the invitation to sign up to it and some of them began to denounce it as exclusive or foreign-made. But they remained in discussions with the civilian signatories, the military and the TM. The resistance committees were sceptical that the military would keep its promises but were largely prepared to give the FPA a chance. The general public, to the extent that this can be ascertained, was hopeful that the Agreement would lead the country out of crisis. Clashes between

activists and the security forces decreased significantly.²⁶

UNITAMS and the TM were not consulted on the text of the agreement, nor did they ask to be. This was an agreement between Sudanese actors, whose ownership UNITAMS and the TM were respecting, and it provided a framework for further negotiations. Moreover, it was the outcome of talks between those who had led the coup against the civilian government in 2021 and those who had been deposed (plus some others) to return to civilian, constitutional rule. In welcoming it, the TM also strongly urged broader participation in the next phase of the process, which was supposed to lead to a final political agreement.

Facilitating the search for a Final Agreement

Given that the military and civilian signatories had requested the TM to facilitate discussion and resolution of the five critical issues upon which they had not been able to agree among themselves, the Mechanism's good-offices role became more direct and hands-on. While the TM continued to see itself as a facilitator, it now also became an active convener and moderator. It supported a Coordinating Committee for the process, which included representatives of the SAF, the RSF, and the civilian signatories of the FPA, and a Joint Secretariat for the day-to-day work; and it helped to convene or co-convened five major workshops between January and March 2023 on the five critical thematic issues that the FPA had left open. This was not just an organisational effort. It involved constant engagement with the military and civilian signatories — , advice on process design, and expertise that the UN, the AU, and IGAD were able to provide. Continuous engagement was needed to keep the process afloat, open and inclusive by, for example making sure that the proportion of participants representing the signatories did not exceed 40 percent of the total, and that women would represent at least 30 percent of participants, as well as, where possible, forging compromises on agendas and speakers. This was not so much a facilitation between “the military” and “the civilians”, as a three- or even three-and-a-half-way discussion between the SAF, the RSF, and the FFC (CC), as well as other civilian groups that supported the process but were uneasy with the dominance of the FFC (CC). In parallel, the TM continued to engage with and sometimes shuttle between the military leaders and the civilian groups in the

²⁴ For an unofficial translation of the FPA see <https://redress.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Framework-Agreement-Final-ENG-05122022.pdf>; an Arabic version can be found at: <https://alsudantoday.com/sudan-news/breaking-news/162570>.

²⁵ “Communiqué on the Situation in Sudan”, African Union Press Releases, 5 December 2022, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20221205/communique-situation-sudan>; “Security Council Press Statement on Sudan”, United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 8 December 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc15132.doc.htm>.

²⁶ ACLED, “Sudan” (see note 12).

process, as well as with the FFC (DB), in particular Minni Minawi's and Jibril Ibrahim's movements and the DUP, and with other groups that were sceptical towards the process or decided to remain outside it, resistance committees, human rights and women's groups, and the international community.

While the TM continued to see itself as a facilitator, it now also became an active convener and moderator.

An aggressive campaign against the "FPA process" began during this period. It was run by the "Islamic Movement" led by NCP leader and former foreign minister Ali Karti, other elements linked to the Bashir regime, and certain individuals and groups inside the FFC (DB). Demonstrations, defamation and even personal threats against UNITAMS and the SRSG increased as the process seemed to inch towards a conclusion. Misinformation disseminated through social media accused the TM, UNITAMS and "Volker" personally of undue interference, sometimes claiming that UNITAMS or the TM had commissioned or even authored the Bar Association's Constitutional Draft or the FPA, were now trying to impose these texts on the Sudanese, and were either exploiting or being exploited by the FFC (CC).

The five contentious issues were dealt with in five consecutive workshops from early January 2023, starting with a meeting on "Dismantling the Old Regime" (i.e., on lustration and accountability), followed by meetings on the "Juba Peace Agreement and the Completion of the Peace Process", "The East" (of Sudan), "Transitional Justice" and finally, in late March, "Security Sector Reform." While modestly called workshops, these were major conferences over three or four days with attendance between 300 and more than 700. Strong participation reflected both the interest of groups and individuals from outside the political elite and the capital to have their voice heard, as well as the agreement between the TM as facilitator and the military and civilian signatories of the FPA that at least 60 percent of the participants should come from groups other than the signatories. The signatories themselves, including Burhan, Hemedti, and FFC and ASM leaders, addressed the respective opening sessions, thereby reaffirming their ownership of and commitment to the process. Panels were then introduced by national experts (and a few international experts brought in by the TM). Discussions were free-ranging and open, often emotional,

but generally cordial. While they involved politicians, military officers and armed group leaders, they were mainly shaped by the participants themselves – intellectuals and experts, activists, members of women's, youth and other civil society groups, tribal leaders and IDPs from across the country. The meetings were live-streamed and summaries were published. The TM also convened a drafting committee to prepare a draft final agreement building on the discussions and recommendations of the workshops, as well as on the FPA, the Constitutional Document of 2019, and discussions with FFC (DB) leaders.²⁷

While the FFC (DB) continued to denounce the process – at times even threatening to bring down any government that would emerge from it – individual FFC (CC) and FFC (DB) leaders had begun to engage with one another in a more serious discussion about a political declaration, separate from the FPA, that would bring the FFC (DB) into the process and give them a stake in the expected new transitional government. A Sovereignty Council statement even indicated, somewhat prematurely, that Burhan and Hemedti had secured approval for such a declaration from Minawi, Jibril, and their allies.²⁸ As the FFC (DB) backed away from signing that document, the TM was asked to help and began to shuttle between the two blocs. At one meeting, towards the end of March, FFC (DB) leaders indicated that they and FFC (CC) interlocutors had agreed on a text. They feared, they said, that FFC (CC) leaders and the military would try to exclude them from decision-making processes, or deny them fair representation in a new transitional set-up. They also warned of instability and chaos if no "equitable" distribution of power and positions was ensured.

With the consent of both FFC blocs, the TM proposed to develop a so-called "bridging" paper on possible formulae for the representation of parties and movements. The FFC (DB) responded with a positive if somewhat misleading statement to the effect that they had in principle accepted a TM proposal for

²⁷ "Committee to Present Draft Final Agreement to Sudan's Civil and Military Actors", *Dabanga Online*, 26 March 2023, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/committee-to-present-draft-final-agreement-to-sudans-civil-and-military-actors>.

²⁸ "Signatories, Non-signatories Finalise Declaration on Sudan Framework Agreement", *Dabanga Online*, 12 February 2023, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/signatories-non-signatories-finalise-declaration-on-sudan-framework-agreement>.

the relative distribution of (future) positions between the signatories to a political declaration.²⁹ No further progress was made on this aspect, as talks between the civilian factions were overtaken by growing disputes within the military component.

The issue of force integration and military-military tensions

The fifth and last workshop focused on security sector reform, and was the most difficult. Sudanese society generally demanded a unified, professional army, not two or more parallel ones. The Framework Agreement noted the need for “security and military reform”, and for the RSF to be integrated into the Armed Forces, but vast difference of interests remained. The SAF leadership wanted the RSF to come under the command of the head of the Army, while Hemedti wanted to preserve the RSF’s autonomy and his own personal power base. Disputes between SAF and RSF leaders delayed the workshop. It was eventually held from 26 to 30 March, and only after Generals Burhan and Hemedti had signed a joint paper on principles for the integration and modernisation of the Armed Forces, which had been mediated by a small group of Sudanese civilians. Responding to the same civilian efforts, a high-level “technical” committee under Generals Kabbashi and Abdulrahim Daglo — Hemedti’s brother and deputy leader of the RSF — was formed to clarify further details. Experts from the United Kingdom, the United States, and the UN contributed ideas on substance.

The workshop began as the other four had done, with welcoming words from international representatives and introductory speeches by the signatories, including Hemedti and Burhan. At the insistence of the Army, foreigners, including the TM’s international staff, were asked to leave the room after the initial presentations in the substantive sessions. Discussions between and among civilians and people in uniform, not least on police reform, were lively. But they also brought the remaining substantive differences between the SAF and RSF leaderships into the open, particularly on the timelines and modalities of an

eventual integration of the RSF into a unified command structure, the composition of a unified command, and the reporting lines to a prospective civilian head of state. Parts of the wider SAF leadership were clearly unhappy that the joint paper Burhan had signed, seemingly without consulting them, defined the timeline for an eventual integration of the RSF as “up to ten years.” Some obviously disliked the political process and the expected return to civilian rule in the first place. The Islamic Movement and other circles linked to the former regime stepped up their campaign against the process before and during the workshop. As a result of these partly internal differences, the SAF participants withdrew from the conference before the closing session. Following an emergency meeting of the Army Command, Burhan communicated that the workshop could go ahead, but the Army would not agree on releasing recommendations. The SAF command issued a statement commending the workshop. But it also said that it was awaiting details on the integration and modernisation of the armed forces from the (Kabbashi-Daglo) technical committee. These details would have to be included in any final political agreement.

Burhan acknowledged that another postponement was due to differences between the SAF and the RSF over the latter’s integration.

Given the remaining gaps on these issues, the civilian and military signatories of the FPA postponed the planned signing of the final agreement several times. On 6 April, in an instant of transparency, Burhan acknowledged in a public speech that another postponement was due to differences between the SAF and the RSF over the latter’s integration.³⁰ No new date for a signing ceremony was set.

Differences between Burhan and Hemedti and their respective milieus had emerged soon after the coup. RSF leaders began to reach out to the politicians that had been overthrown, suggesting that they, rather than Burhan, were trying to find a political solution. They sometimes even indicated, not very convincingly, that Burhan had lured them into the coup. Burhan and other Army leaders were increas-

²⁹ Tweet Minni Arko Minawi, 5 April 2023, <https://twitter.com/ArkoMinawi/status/1643629155781685249>; “Sudan: Democratic Bloc Agrees to Participate in Political Settlement, if Its Preconditions Are Approved”, *Al Taghyeer*, 6 April 2023, <https://www.altaghyeer.info/en/2023/04/06/sudandemocratic-bloc-agrees-to-participate-in-political-settlement-if-its-preconditions-are-approved/>.

³⁰ “Sudan: Al Burhan Justifies Delay of Signing Final Political Declaration”, *Al Taghyeer*, 6 April 2023, <https://www.altaghyeer.info/en/2023/04/06/sudan-al-burhan-justifies-delay-of-signing-final-political-declaration/>.

ingly concerned about the RSF's autonomous and hybrid existence. The RSF was in fact both an element of the state's official security apparatus that owed its existence to a Bashir-era law, later amended by decree from General Burhan,³¹ and a semi-private army under the command of the Daglo family. There were mutual, if initially muted, recriminations about responsibility for excessive use of force against demonstrators and for past atrocities, the political ambitions of Burhan and Hemedti and their respective links to the Bashir regime and its remnants, the Daglo family's business interests, and Hemedti's allegedly uncoordinated international activities, including a week-long trip to Moscow in February 2022 that was not cut short even after Russia began its invasion of Ukraine. Burhan reportedly also faced criticism from fellow generals for being too lenient with Hemedti and the RSF.³²

Both leaders had become more vocal on these issues since summer 2022, but continued to act as representatives of the "military component" in their negotiations with the civilian side. They kept addressing meetings together – such as the FPA signing ceremony – but also played to different audiences in their speeches. Notably, Hemedti called the coup a mistake and even apologized for it. Burhan repeatedly reaffirmed his and the Army's commitment to a political process and return to civilian rule, but also made this conditional on civilians not interfering with the military, and on an agreement on integrating the RSF into the Army. Both openly vented their differences in private meetings.

As SRSG, I warned the Security Council about "rising tensions" between the two military formations, which had been building since the beginning of the year.³³ Somewhat later, I also asked two regional states whose influence by far exceeded that of the UN to use their influence, bring the two military leaders

together and urge them to stand down from their confrontational course. Not only did the rhetoric of SAF and RSF leaders reveal their mutual lack of trust. They also built up their respective forces in the capital. The RSF brought hundreds of combat vehicles into Khartoum, the SAF publicly transported heavy tanks into the city, apparently both as a show of force and, practically, to better protect the Armed Forces General Command. At one point Hemedti complained that his residence was surrounded by army tanks. Burhan expressed his conviction that the RSF wanted to "create a problem"; army reinforcements, he said, had been brought in as a deterrent and to prevent intentional or accidental clashes. The RSF also claimed, wrongly according to UNITAMS political and military experts, that Egyptian fighter planes and crew stationed at Merowe air base in northern Sudan were there to confront the RSF. Four days before hostilities commenced in Khartoum, the RSF deployed forces northwards and laid siege to the air base.

UNITAMS and the TM warned both SAF and RSF about the potential consequences of their respective moves and of the risks of third-party provocations, misunderstandings and accidents, and urged them to avoid confrontational postures and de-escalate. The TM also continued to coordinate with other international actors in developing and offering ideas on the most divisive issues. Both Burhan and Hemedti, as well as their closest associates, repeatedly underlined their commitment to the political process, to resolving issues between the military formations through talks, and to reaching a consensus on the eventual integration of forces. On 14 April 2023, RSF deputy commander Abdularahim Daglo even assured the Tripartite envoys that there would "never be war" between the RSF and SAF. Civilians from the FFC (CC) played a key mediating role: They got agreement in principle from both SAF and RSF to form a delegation under the leadership of Hadi Idriss, head of SLM-TC and one of the ASM-Juba signatories, to defuse the tension in Merowe. Also, another meeting of the military-military "technical committee" was scheduled for Saturday morning, 15 April. Neither of these came to pass.

War

Fighting between the SAF and the RSF broke out on the morning of 15 April. This changed the environment for UNITAMS yet again, and more dramatically

31 "The Rapid Support Forces Act 2017"; Transitional Military Council, "Constitutional Decree to Amend a Law", 30 July 2019.

32 Ehsan Saleh, Hazem Tharwat and Omar al-Faroug, "A Coup Divided, a War Ignited", *Mada Masr*, 26 April 2023, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2023/04/26/feature/politics/a-coup-divided-a-war-ignited/>.

33 "Security Council Remarks Special Representative of the Secretary-General to Sudan and Head of UNITAMS, Mr. Volker Perthes", *UNITAMS* (online), 20 March 2023, <https://unitams.unmissions.org/en/security-council-remarks-special-representative-secretary-general-sudan-and-head-unitams-mr-volker>.

than in October 2021. After it became clear that the fighting — which immediately engulfed Khartoum and Darfur — was more than a short, vicious conflagration, the UN and most diplomatic missions decided to evacuate their staff or encouraged them to move to safer regions. By the end of April, UNITAMS had relocated a core team to Port Sudan and the majority of its international staff to Nairobi, Kenya.

First shots, escalating war

The first sounds of fighting were heard from around 8 a.m. It is virtually impossible to establish who actually fired the first shot. Both sides complained to me, in various calls on 15 April, that the other side was attacking them, and insisted that they had not initiated the hostilities. I cannot say who set it off. Other usually well-informed observers say the same.³⁴

Three different, plausible narratives as to how the fighting started have been adopted by different parts of the political and military spectrum. There seems to be agreement that the shooting war began, at slightly different times, at two places in Khartoum: at an RSF military encampment in Sports City and at Burhan's residence (the Presidential Guesthouse). There is no agreement about which of the two incidents happened first. But there is no dispute that fighting spread rapidly in Khartoum, Darfur and Merowe airport that same day.³⁵

One narrative, originally disseminated by individuals who were involved in de-escalation efforts, suggests that the RSF was attacked by a military or paramilitary unit operating under the command of Bashir-era officers under the sway of the NCP/Islamic Movement, and without the knowledge of the SAF leadership. One retired general added that the Muslim Brotherhood had previously attempted to provoke a clash between the SAF and the RSF.³⁶ Politically, that

would be plausible. The Islamic Movement (the political formation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan) never left any doubt that they wanted the Framework Agreement and its follow-up talks to fail, and would resist any handover from the military to a new civilian government.

A second plausible story is heard largely from the SAF itself, but is also supported by a number of civilian observers. This version maintains that the RSF attempted a coup by forcing their way into Burhan's residence and trying to kill him. Had Burhan been killed, Hemedti as Vice-President or "First Deputy" would automatically have succeeded him. Instead, Burhan survived and the fighting spread. The Army, so the narrative goes, had been prepared for a coup attempt, but not for war — which explains their dismal performance. The third story is almost a mirror image of the second; it is mostly heard from civilians who consider themselves neutral. The RSF, in this telling, had indeed had a plan for a possible confrontation that included the assassination of Burhan and other top generals. But so had the SAF with regard to Hemedti and his brother. Without the two brothers' very direct and personal leadership of the RSF, the SAF would have been able to use the 400-plus professional SAF officers who had been seconded to the RSF to either take over or collapse the RSF's command structures. After the SAF had struck, this story holds, the RSF also set their plan in motion, just more successfully.

Both RSF and SAF had been building up for war, and the question of who shot first may never be answered conclusively.

The question of who shot first may never be answered conclusively. Both RSF and SAF, it seems, had contingency plans for a possible conflict that included a decapitating strike against the other side. More importantly, both sides had been building up for war, bringing additional forces to Khartoum during the preceding weeks, and were on high alert. Both sides were irresponsibly escalating their rhetoric and mobilising supporters while insisting that they would not initiate fighting. There was no "red phone line" between the two leaders. Both were warned about the

³⁴ International Crisis Group, "Sudan: A Year of War", 11 April 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/sudan-year-war>.

³⁵ Ostensibly to avoid the question of where and when fighting actually began that morning, Malik Agar, leader of the SPLM/N (Agar) faction whom General Burhan promoted to Vice President of the Sovereignty Council in May 2023, has repeatedly asserted that the war actually began on April 13 when the RSF laid siege to Merowe airport. This is certainly a legitimate interpretation, even though actual fighting in Merowe only began on the 15th.

³⁶ "Retired Sudanese Major General: Muslim Brotherhood Fired First Shot in War, then Hid Behind Army", *Asharq Al-*

Awsat, 7 January 2024, <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4774021-retired-sudanese-major-general-muslim-brotherhood-fired-first-shot-war-then-hid>.

dangers of what they were doing by international interlocutors on the ground (certainly by all three TM envoys as well as the US and Saudi ambassadors) and by civilian actors. They were urged to de-escalate and consider new ideas on their differences over substance. Both had also agreed to another meeting of the technical committee that Saturday morning, to reduce tensions and find a solution to the issue of force integration.

The RSF was clearly better prepared for conflict, and for urban warfare. It immediately took the battle to the heart of the SAF – Burhan’s “Guesthouse” which it stormed and occupied, and the General Command Headquarters which it besieged from day one – and succeeded in gaining control over much of the capital. While an active first move by the SAF cannot be discounted, its lack of preparedness lends some credibility to the narrative of a coup attempt by the RSF, and to the suggestion that a third force acting outside the SAF command may have provoked the war through an initial attack on the RSF. Given the already tense atmosphere and the lack of provision for crisis communication between the two sides, it is entirely possible that the actual fighting started by accident.³⁷ Such a course of events, however, is entirely absent from the narratives traded in the Sudanese debate.

Widening war, human suffering

The RSF soon gained the upper hand in Khartoum and Darfur. Most of the capital fell under its control within the first two days, including the Presidential Palace and Burhan’s “Guesthouse”. The RSF also occupied the Merowe airfield and detained the Egyptian air force personnel for a few days. The SAF entrenched itself in key military installations, including the General Command compound where General Burhan and his closest associates remained under siege for four months. Khartoum (including its sister cities Omdurman and Bahri) remained a battleground; fighting continued in Darfur, spread to Kordofan and, in 2024, to Jazira and Sennar state. General Burhan

³⁷ Reportedly, one Army reinforcement unit brought in from Nyala on 14 April had set up camp that night just outside the Sports City, where the RSF had a major encampment. The RSF may have seen that as a siege on their troops. It surrounded the SAF soldiers and demanded that they lay down arms, leading to a (first) armed clash which then rapidly escalated.

was evacuated from the besieged General Command in August, reportedly by Ukrainian commandos,³⁸ and his government relocated to Port Sudan. At the time of writing (July 2024), the SAF had regained a limited amount of lost ground in Omdurman. But the RSF continued to control most of the capital, most of Darfur including four of the five state capitals, parts of the Kordofan states, the road connections between Khartoum and Darfur, and Jazira state. The SAF controlled the Eastern states, including Port Sudan and the Red Sea Coast, and the North including the border with Egypt. Fighting continued, especially in Khartoum, El Fasher (North Darfur), Jazira and Sennar states.

RSF troops looted UN warehouses, while the SAF-aligned authorities in Port Sudan denied humanitarian access to RSF-controlled territories.

Both warring parties committed atrocities. The RSF was responsible for looting, rape and murder, in particular in Khartoum and Jazira state, and for ethnically motivated massacres of the Masalit population in West Darfur.³⁹ Only the SAF had an air force and heavy artillery, which it often used for indiscriminate bombing and shelling; the SAF and allied militias as well as the RSF were also accused of extrajudicial killings, execution of prisoners, and other human rights violations.⁴⁰ RSF troops looted several UN warehouses, while the SAF-aligned authorities in Port Sudan frequently denied humanitarian access to RSF-controlled territories. According to conservative estimates, more than 15,000 Sudanese have been

³⁸ “Details of the Defense Intelligence of Ukraine Operation in Sudan Have Been Reported”, *Militarnyi*, 7 March 2024, <https://mil.in.ua/en/news/details-of-the-defense-intelligence-of-ukraine-operation-in-sudan-have-been-reported/>; see also Ian Lovett, Nikita Nikolaienko and Nicholas Bariyo, “Ukraine Is Now Fighting Russia in Sudan”, *Wall Street Journal*, 6 March 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/ukraine-is-now-fighting-russia-in-sudan-87caf1d8>.

³⁹ Human Rights Council, Fifty fifth session, 26 February – 5 April 2024, *Situation of Human Rights in Sudan: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, A/HRC/55/29, 22 February 2024.

⁴⁰ See Human Rights Watch, “Sudan: Warring Parties Execute Detainees, Mutilate Bodies”, 28 August 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/29/sudan-warring-parties-execute-detainees-mutilate-bodies>.

killed in the fighting,⁴¹ tens of thousands injured, and Sudan has become world's largest humanitarian crisis: More than eight million people have been internally displaced since the beginning of the fighting, more than two million are seeking refuge outside the country.⁴² Hospitals have been destroyed, health services have largely broken down. By summer 2024, 20 million people were threatened by acute food insecurity.⁴³ In August, famine was confirmed in at least one refugee camp in Darfur.⁴⁴ Food shortages were not due to a natural disaster, but were man-made, as planting and harvesting, transportation, and access for humanitarian organisations were restricted by the fighting – or even deliberately by the warring parties to prevent food deliveries to areas under control of the other side.⁴⁵

Ceasefire and humanitarian efforts

UNITAMS' good offices were immediately used in efforts to reach a ceasefire and to support Sudanese initiatives to that effect, further to monitor and, where possible, address violations of human rights

41 ACLED, "One Year of War in Sudan", 14 April 2024, <https://acleddata.com/2024/04/14/sudan-situation-update-april-2024-one-year-of-war-in-sudan/>. Most figures on war deaths in Sudan exclude those killed in clashes and ethnic massacres occurring in parallel to the fighting between RSF and SAF, and generally seem to underestimate unaccounted-for fatalities. Reportedly, US officials estimated that up to 150,000 people had been killed in the fighting by September 2024. See "How Sudan's Devastating Civil War Became a Global Battleground", *Financial Times*, 11 September 2024.

42 International Organization for Migration (IOM), "DTM Sudan Mobility Update (02). Bi-Monthly Report July – August 2024", <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/sudan-mobility-overview-2>.

43 IPC Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, "IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis June 2024 – February 2025", 22 July 2024, https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Sudan_Acute_Food_Insecurity_Jun2024_Feb2025_Report.pdf.

44 "Famine Confirmed in Sudan's North Darfur, Confirming UN Agencies Worst Fears", UNICEF Press Release, 1 August 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/famine-confirmed-sudans-north-darfur-confirming-un-agencies-worst-fears>.

45 Alex de Waal, "Famine Hits Sudan as Peace Talks Fall Short Yet Again", *BBC website*, 25 August 2024; "Krieg im Sudan: Wenn Hunger die Waffe ist", *Der Spiegel*, Podcast, 6 September 2024, <https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/krieg-im-sudan-zwei-armeen-zerstoeren-das-land-podcast-a-1e6802d9-e65a-46fc-9a13-26505f860e09>.

and international humanitarian law, and to contribute to efforts to find a coordinated regional and international approach to ending the war. I was in regular contact with the leaders of both sides during the first days and weeks of the war, first from Khartoum and then from Port Sudan. On the second day, after several phone calls with RSF and SAF leaders, supported by personal calls from UN Secretary-General Guterres, both sides publicly announced that they would cease the fighting for three hours "in response to UN efforts" – to at least allow people to break the Ramadan fast. This commitment and similar ones over the following days in response to coordinated attempts with the US ambassador were only partly honoured. Efforts to reach a ceasefire were then taken over by joint US and Saudi interventions which eventually led to the invitation of military delegations from both forces to Jeddah for several rounds of negotiations – starting in May, suspended in June, resumed in October, suspended again in December 2023. Early efforts by Sudanese actors, including a "mediation team" set up by three ASM chiefs who declared themselves neutral at that stage (Malik Agar, Minni Minawi and Jibril Ibrahim) also remained unsuccessful.

UNITAMS' human-rights and political teams maintained their contacts with both military formations.

Just once during the early days of the war was the TM able to bring politicians and ASM leaders from both the FPA signatories and the FFC (DB) together for a virtual meeting. All of them had denounced the fighting and called for an immediate end. Both sides professed their neutrality in the war at that time. But the split between the two FFC blocs seemed to widen rather than narrow, not least as some FFC (DB) leaders began to support a narrative according to which the FFC (CC) had conspired with the RSF to start the war. In November 2023, Minawi and Jibril declared that they were abandoning their neutrality; in early 2024 they openly entered the fighting on the side of SAF.⁴⁶

UNITAMS' human-rights and political teams maintained their contacts with both military formations,

46 "Darfur Armed Movement Renounce Neutrality in Sudan War", *Dabanga Online*, 17 November 2023, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/armed-movements-renounce-neutrality-in-sudan-war>; "SLM-Minawi Joins Sudan's Fight against RSF", *Sudan Tribune*, 24 March 2024, <https://sudantribune.com/article283695/>.

as did the UNITAMS team chairing the Darfur PCC and state-level ceasefire committees. The ceasefire committees continued to hold virtual meetings with representatives of the ASM Juba signatories as well as initially of SAF and RSF, later only of SAF, until UNITAMS was closed down. This open line to the warring parties occasionally helped to secure the release of detainees, arrange safe passage for civilians, or safeguard humanitarian access. My own more or less daily contacts with SAF and RSF leaderships continued from Port Sudan. This was technically challenging as phone networks had largely ceased to operate and the internet was weak at best. I regularly raised international humanitarian law (IHL) violations in these conversations, and both sides usually denied all allegations. Burhan and his deputy Kabbashi at least acknowledged that they were fully aware of the Army's responsibilities under international humanitarian law; Hemedti seemed to shrug off such reminders.

With regard to regional and international efforts, UNITAMS remained the convener of the Friends of Sudan Group, and supported the AU's initiative to establish a diplomatic architecture for peace efforts in Addis Ababa, with several groups of states and a Secretariat composed of the TM partners and a representative of the League of Arab States. This architecture remained largely unused, however, until it was revived with the appointment of an AU High-Level Panel on Sudan in 2024. Instead, a number of parallel regional ventures were launched, including a mediation attempt by four IGAD heads of state and a Summit of Neighbouring States hosted by Egypt. The Saudi/US-sponsored talks in Jeddah remained the only format that both sides accepted in principle. Since Saudi Arabia and the United States initially choose to exclude other regional and international players from these talks, "Jeddah" only added to the fragmentation of international efforts and fora. Even the UN was only admitted in its humanitarian coordination function.⁴⁷

Humanitarian aid was – and still is – coordinated from Port Sudan by the UN Regional Coordinator/

⁴⁷ This is not the place to elaborate on regional and international diplomatic efforts to reach a ceasefire or end the war in Sudan. For an overview see: International Crisis Group, "Sudan's Calamitous Civil War: A Chance to Draw Back from the Abyss", 9 January 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/sudans-calamitous-civil-war-chance-draw-back-abyss>.

Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) – who was also the deputy (DSRSG) and later the acting head of UNITAMS until the mission ended. UNITAMS' political presence in Port Sudan was challenged from the outset by an aggressive campaign by groups that declared themselves pro-military. Tribesmen were bussed into the city for angry anti-UNITAMS demonstrations, accusing UNITAMS of having triggered the war, denouncing it for not supporting the SAF, or demanding the expulsion of the SRSRSG. This was accompanied by another wave of misinformation spread through various social networks to depict UNITAMS as supporting the enemy.⁴⁸ Burhan and other military leaders distanced themselves from such attacks, but continued to rely on support from the forces behind them.

End of mission

My own presence in Port Sudan ended rather unexpectedly. Following my briefing to the Security Council at the end of May,⁴⁹ and during my absence from Sudan for that purpose, the Secretary-General received a letter with Burhan's facsimile signature from Sudan's Permanent Mission, requesting my replacement. After the Secretary-General stated that he stood by his SRSRSG, Sudan's Foreign Ministry notified the UN that I had been declared "persona non grata". While the UN Secretariat, as usual in these cases, stated that "persona non grata" declarations are not applicable to UN personnel,⁵⁰ the declaration had its effect nonetheless. It prevented me from returning to Sudan, and an SRSRSG who resides outside the country is operationally handicapped. Sudan's Foreign Ministry did its best to prevent any further contact to Sudanese officials, even outside the country. Feeling that I could no longer do my work effectively, I resigned as SRSRSG in September 2023.

"PNG"-ing the head of UNITAMS was only a first step, anyway, towards removing the UN's political

⁴⁸ Fake news was often absurd. For example it was alleged that the SRSRSG had tried to get a UAE plane-load of weapons for the RSF cleared by Sudanese customs in Port Sudan.

⁴⁹ "UNITAMS SRSRSG Mr. Volker Perthes Remarks to the Security Council 22 May 2023", *UNITAMS* (online), <https://unitams.unmissions.org/en/unitams-srsg-mr-volker-perthes-rUNemarks-security-council-22-may-2023>.

⁵⁰ "UN Says Sudan Cannot Apply Persona Non Grata to UN Envoy", *Reuters*, 9 June 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-says-sudan-cannot-apply-persona-non-grata-un-envoy-2023-06-09/>.

presence from Sudan altogether. In November, Sudan officially requested the termination of the UNITAMS mandate. Given that UNITAMS was a Special Political Mission established at Sudan's request, the Security Council decided to end its operations on 29 February 2024.

The head of mission's absence from Sudan and his derecognition by one of the warring parties did not entirely end UNITAMS' good offices function, but did severely undermine it. Contacts with the government in Port Sudan and the SAF, as well as with the RSF and the ASMs, continued on lower levels, not least through the Permanent Ceasefire Committee (PCC) in Darfur which remained active in seeking, and sometimes achieving, limited local truces. With the SAF side officially refusing to participate in top-level contacts, UNITAMS' good offices in these months were mainly directed towards Sudanese civilians across the political and societal spectrum, offering support for the coordination of anti-war activities and facilitating conversations between different camps and forces. UNITAMS also maintained a coordinating function for interested states through the "Friends-of-Sudan" group, and supported the diplomatic efforts of AU and IGAD through a small presence in Addis.

Interpretations and Open Questions

Many questions remain. It remains in doubt whether the generals genuinely intended to commit to the process they asked the Tripartite Mechanism to facilitate, or to honour agreements they had signed. Sudanese and non-Sudanese observers will continue to discuss whether the UN, the TM or the international community could have prevented the war, and how. None of those questions can be conclusively answered here, but they all impact on the lessons that can be drawn from Sudan's aborted transition to democratic governance and peace.

UNITAMS' good offices were employed, together with its partners in the TM and varying degrees of coordination with representatives of interested states, in a fluid and conflictual environment with shifting constellations among the key stake- and powerholders, epitomised by the morphing of the "military component", which had jointly overthrown the civilian government, into two antagonistic forces. The civilian side, naturally, always included a broad spectrum. Fragmentation increased before and after the 2021 coup, with two core political alliances claiming the mantle of the original FFC. Other political parties and movements, civil society groups, resistance committees and activists ended up on various side of both the political and the military conflict, while Bashir-era political and military networks reappeared on the side of the SAF.

Core interests

Wars are caused not by accidents, but by interests and fears. The bottom line is that the war was caused by growing differences between the coup leaders about the spoils of the coup, i.e., control over the state and its resources, and about how to resolve the untenable situation the coup had created. This included the question of how to distribute power and positions within the military, particularly after a possible return

to civilian governance. The immediate background to the conflict was shaped by the dispute over Security Sector Reform or, more concretely, the integration of the RSF into a unified military command structure.

The war was caused by growing differences between the coup leaders about the spoils of the coup.

General Burhan and the SAF leadership clearly felt they were in a better position, politically at least, during the weeks that preceded the outbreak of hostilities. Burhan, after all, was recognised domestically and internationally as the de facto head of state and chief decision-maker. He was the person leading all the negotiations for the military side. Where Hemedti participated, he did so as "Number Two". Burhan could also draw out the signing of a final agreement until, as he put it, differences between the Army and the RSF over questions of integration had been solved⁵¹ – knowing that experts from the UN, the Tripartite Mechanism and the Quad were closer to his understanding of force integration and a unified command structure than to Hemedti's. He may have expected that both the civilian signatories of the FPA who urgently wanted a deal and those international players who were pushing for a speedy signature of a final declaration would lean on Hemedti to give in.

Hemedti was much less relaxed. He never officially disputed Burhan's position as Head of the Sovereignty Council, referring to him as "President" when they appeared together, and also accepted that Burhan would remain as commander-in-chief (al-qa'id al-'amm) of the Armed Forces after a Final Agreement and a transfer of power to a civilian government. He left no doubt that he wanted to change the relationship, though, and insisted that, as leader of the RSF, he should report independently and directly to the

51 "Sudan: Al Burhan Justifies Delay" (see note 30).

future civilian head of state and “Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces” (al-qa’id al-a’ala), rather than through the SAF commander-in-chief. Hemedti also seemed to think that the international community was siding with the SAF, expecting him to concede to a form of integration where the RSF leader would eventually be reporting to the commander-in-chief. Hemedti was reportedly particularly annoyed by proposals on the military chain of command and eventual integration of RSF, including a British-US non-paper arguing that a “unified army” could not have two commanders.⁵² He refused to meet with the Tripartite Mechanism for several weeks because of remarks I had made to the effect that Sudan could not afford parallel armies, and the need for eventual integration under a single unified command structure. Hemedti was also angry that the TM was dealing with SAF and RSF on equal footing. This was unfair, his brother Abdulrahim Daglo argued, as it ignored that the RSF was committed to a return to civilian rule, while SAF leaders were not.

The core issue for Hemedti, however, was obviously the prospect of being subordinate to the commander-in-chief in a unified army. This would eventually have cost him his independent power base — a quasi-private “regular force” under his family’s control — and was clearly a red line for him.

Hindsight questions: The FPA and the core protagonists

Several questions arise with regard to the political process and the good-offices function of UNITAMS, AU, IGAD and other international players. To start with the main antagonists: Did the UN and the international community underestimate Hemedti’s preparedness to defend his personal interests with military force? And did they overestimate Burhan’s and the SAF’s preparedness to abide by agreements they had signed? More concretely, and counterfactually: Would a war have been avoided if Hemedti had not felt under pressure from both the international

⁵² Payton Knopf, a former US deputy special envoy for the Horn of Africa, argues that this proposal (which he says was “put forward by the United States”) was the “straw that ... broke the camel’s back”. See his article “The Year(s) of Magical Thinking on Sudan”, *Just Security*, 12 August 2024, <https://www.justsecurity.org/98554/sudan-diplomacy-fallacies/>.

community and the SAF to integrate his forces into a unified Army, and probably also from some of the civilians who wanted a deal and needed the military leaders to agree on something so that a Final Agreement could be signed? Or did individual, relevant SAF leaders believe that the international community would eventually support them or at least show understanding if they were to move against the RSF? And were the military prepared at all to hand executive power back to a civilian government?

UNITAMS, the TM and others on the ground probably underestimated the willingness of both sides to risk an all-out confrontation.

The Framework Agreement and the military leaders

There are no conclusive answers to such speculative questions. With hindsight, UNITAMS, the TM and others who worked on the ground, facilitated the political process and urged de-escalation probably underestimated the willingness of both sides to risk an all-out confrontation, and the recklessness with which they would pursue it. This is not only the story of two generals, of course. Even if Burhan had been more open to Hemedti’s interest in maintaining the autonomy of his force, the SAF as an institution would probably not have accepted such an arrangement, and might have prevented it by force of a coup. In my assessment, Burhan would have signed a final agreement, with some hesitation perhaps, if key demands regarding the integration of the RSF had been met. Negotiating with those they had overthrown and then delivering power to a civilian government was certainly not his — or Hemedti’s — plan in October 2021. But realising that their takeover had not led to a consolidation, they more or less grudgingly accepted the need to do so. Burhan repeatedly failed, though, to adequately involve his own wider military leadership in the negotiations. He did make certain efforts to prepare fellow officers for an agreement, even publicly stating at a military event that “the Army” had signed the FPA “out of conviction”.⁵³ But he was certainly not willing to risk his own position by agreeing to a compromise that the SAF would sub-

⁵³ Video of Burhan’s speech on “X”: https://x.com/www_frd2010/status/1787813533675127074?s=12&t=0WbTYHI9KheIp2LaZ45Ab.

sequently reject. Hemedti also made public statements about his commitment to the FPA. But he felt cornered in the talks about force integration. Arguably, it could have helped if regional players, as we proposed, had used their influence on both military leaders, including with offers of personal guarantees. The UN had made it crystal clear to both sides that any attempt, by either of them, to seek a military solution to their dispute would be rejected and denounced. Regional states may not have been equally clear.

Only civilian governance and civilian oversight over the military could have checked the intra-military power struggle.

Did the Framework Agreement, as some Sudanese factions have claimed, push the military into confrontation? Or, more generally, would Sudan have been spared a devastating war if the TM and other international players had refrained from their efforts to facilitate a negotiated return to civilian rule? My informed guess is that the power conflict between the two military formations would have escalated anyway, with or without a political process. The conflict began almost immediately after their joint power grab in October 2021; it sharpened and became increasingly visible before negotiations on the Framework Agreement had even started. Even without any military-civilian agreement or political process, the SAF would have wanted to bring the RSF under control, and the Daglo brothers would have tried to maintain the autonomy of their force. The FPA touched on the political issues that divided SAF and RSF, but did not solve them. What followed was an attempt to transform the conflict between the two military formations into a technical debate on security sector reform, and thereby defuse it. Clearly, however, the dispute about force integration and command structures was not about technicalities; it essentially revolved around competition over power and resources. Arguably, only the establishment of civilian governance and civilian oversight over the military could have checked the intra-military power struggle. There is nothing to suggest that this struggle would not have broken out without a political process, or even in the absence of attempts by the UN, AU and IGAD to support a return to civilian rule. Political figures who claim that the Framework Agreement was some form of international conspiracy to push Sudan into war ignore the fact that it was nego-

tiated between the two military leaders and their civilian counterparts alone, and neither the UN nor other international players were in the room. They also fail to explain how the process that followed the agreement, and was indeed facilitated by the TM, could have pushed the two military forces into war. And they underrate, as conspiracy theories tend to, the agency of national actors.

Civilian and para-civilian actors

While military actors were ultimately the ones who started and pursued the war, civilian and para-civilian actors had significant impact on the preceding political dynamics. They certainly added to the general polarisation. It is much less certain, though, that greater willingness on their part to seek compromise and common ground would have changed the outcome.

As much as the polarisation among civilians and para-civilians in the months preceding the war was focused on the FPA, it did not originate in that agreement or its substance. The same divisions, more or less, had already existed, in the positioning of groups and coalitions with regard to the Bar Association's constitutional initiative, the US-Saudi-sponsored talks between civilian and military leaders, or the TM-hosted "Preparatory Talks" — as well as in the weeks preceding the 2021 coup.

The TM engaged regularly and closely with the two main political coalitions — the FFC (CC) and the FFC (DB) — and with individual parties and non-partisan civilian actors. But it did not work with an increasingly active third bloc, sometimes referred to as the Islamic Current, which was dominated by the Islamic Movement and the officially banned NCP and relied on a network of groups and parties that had been allied with the Bashir regime. In hindsight, one can well ask whether UNITAMS or the TM should have sought more contacts with this bloc despite the fact that the NCP was banned and representatives of the Islamic Movement were not seen as legitimate actors in the post-revolution consensus of 2019.

The two civilian blocs with which the TM was dealing were each represented by a small core group of men — and one woman in the case of the FFC (CC).⁵⁴ The polarisation between these blocs and their respec-

⁵⁴ These included Khalid Omar Yusuf, Taha Osman Ishaq, Yasir Arman, Omar Degeir, Mariam Mahdi al-Sadiq, Babikar Feisal, Hadi Idriss in the FFC (CC), Minni Minawi, Jibril Ibrahim, Mubarak Ardol and later Jaafar al-Mighrani in the FFC (DB).

tive interactions with the TM reflected hard interests. Ironically, Burhan and Hemedti negotiated the Framework Agreement with a handful of FFC (CC) politicians they had jailed for several months after the October 2021 coup. These FFC (CC) leaders certainly represented the civilian component of the transitional government that the military had ousted, and they also saw themselves as representing the demands of “the street” for a return to civilian rule. This gave them a strong sense of entitlement to lead the negotiations with the military, and to return in one or other form as part of a civilian set-up once the coup was reversed. They were aware that any agreement and transitional government needed a broader base, but did not like the TM’s prodding to that effect. They insisted that “other forces” should be brought into the process in stages, and with somewhat lesser roles. When civil society actors, including a group of business leaders, tried to widen the ranks of the civilian coalition behind the Bar Association’s constitutional draft or the Framework Agreement, the FFC (CC) core found it difficult to accept that forces that had not originally supported the revolution or had not taken a clear position against the 2021 coup would have an equal stake in decision making – about a future prime minister for example, details of an agreement with the military, or the selection of a new government once a Final Agreement was in place.

Minawi, Jibril, and some lesser but vocal actors in the FFC (DB) feared exactly that. While they insisted that they never had called for a coup, they had certainly added to the polarisation and helped to prepare the atmosphere for it through their sit-in in front of the presidential palace. They had maintained or strengthened their positions in the following months, and were generally content with the post-coup status quo. Their position, as they repeatedly explained, was that “25 October”, or the coup, simply was not the issue. Historical marginalisation was. The Juba Agreement, they argued, had (partly) corrected the exclusion of the periphery. The gains it had brought to former rebel groups in terms of participation in power and resources were only fair and needed to be protected. “Exclusion” remained a theme in their narrative, even during a period where their former cabinet colleagues were in jail, while they were in government. When Burhan and Hemedti chose to

negotiate a deal with the FFC-CC leaders, they felt both betrayed and threatened.⁵⁵

The marginalisation of Sudan’s peripheries has been the major cause of the domestic wars that Sudan has experienced since independence.

Their objection to the FPA was not about substance. At one point, Minawi even claimed that much of the FPA text was his own brainchild, now misused by the FFC (CC) to dominate any process and future government. He and his allies, he said, would resist any attempt to reduce their share in power and marginalise them again. Consequently, in March and early April 2023, when it seemed that a final agreement and subsequent formation of a government could no longer be stopped, FFC (DB) leaders indicated that they might get on board if they were fairly represented.⁵⁶

There is no doubt that the marginalisation of Sudan’s peripheries has been the major cause of the domestic wars that Sudan has experienced since independence, and that racist attitudes against people originating from Darfur have been widespread among the ruling elites in Khartoum – including the Islamists. Ironically, Hemedti, his brother and their civilian advisors have framed their political agenda in the same way as Minawi or Jibril: Darfuris, regardless of their ethnic – Arab or African – or tribal origin had been discriminated, not least in the public service and the Army. The RSF, they claimed, was therefore a much more “national” force than the SAF, whose officer corps was largely dominated by Arabs from the Nile Valley, while the foot soldiers were drawn from Darfur and other peripheral regions.

UNITAMS and the TM treated the two FFCs and the leading groups within them as key political stakeholders. Both FFCs, as outlined above, had a strong sense of entitlement linked to their respective political identity – the FFC (CC) as representatives of the overthrown civilian component, the revolution against Bashir, and the demands of the coup resisters;

⁵⁵ Burhan’s and Hemedti’s positions here were rather similar: the FFC (DB) should have a stake in any future set-up, and the FFC (CC) should be more open to these and other political forces. But the generals would only negotiate with the FFC (CC) whom they saw as their civilian counterparts and antagonists, not with Minawi, Jibril, Ardol or others who, in the words of Burhan, had come into their positions “on our shoulders” (‘ala aktafna).

⁵⁶ “Sudan: Democratic Bloc Agrees” (see note 29).

Minawi, Jibril and some of their allies as former rebels who had fought social, economic and political marginalisation for decades and would now defend the gains of the JPA regardless of the military or civilian nature of government. These identities and their differing interests with regard to a political process also shaped their interaction with the TM – and constituted a challenge for the TM’s good offices and public image.

Differences between the FFC (CC) and the TM with regard to the latter’s role were significant, but were generally not aired in public. The FFC (CC) scuppered the TM-hosted “Preparatory Talks” in June 2022 by boycotting them. In essence, they saw themselves as an essential part of the revolution against the Bashir regime and the main legitimate representative of the civilian government ousted by the 2021 coup. They also, on both grounds, felt they were entitled to lead any negotiations with the military and to determine the design of any political process, with or without support from any facilitator. Their key interest – to “undo the coup” and return to a civilian-led political transition – was fully in line with the mandates of UNITAMS and of the AU and IGAD envoys who had been brought in following the coup to support a return to constitutional, civilian government. On that basis, the FFC (CC) demanded that the facilitators coordinate with them, and with the military on the other side, rather than putting them and the FFC (DB) on equal footing. Individual FFC (CC) leaders developed an attitude that UNITAMS and their regional partners, or any other would-be facilitators, were dispensable unless they were supporting the FFC (CC). Discussions between the TM and the FFC (CC) were often very frank. The FFC (CC), however, never aired these differences publicly. Their policy, instead, was to demonstrate their understanding with the international community, including the TM. And UNITAMS or the TM, as facilitators, did not publicly take issue with the positions or attitudes of any of the stakeholders.

FFC (DB) leaders had a different and generally more aggressive approach. This may have been reinforced by the sense that the TM, with its clear objective of supporting a return to civilian rule, did not exactly support their interests. FFC (DB) leaders also frequently expressed their not entirely irrational feeling that international representatives in general, and Western interlocutors in particular, were inherently closer to the educated urban middle class to which most FFC (CC) leaders belonged. FFC (DB) representatives often

assumed that AU and IGAD – whose representatives on the ground were Africans and Muslims – would be more sympathetic to their cause than UNITAMS. While this did not reflect the reality within the Tripartite Mechanism, some of these leaders may nonetheless have believed it to be so. Others used this theme strategically in order to sow division within the TM. Among other things, FFC (DB) leaders chose to speak of the TM when they publicised meetings with the Mechanism, asked for support or commended the facilitation. They spoke of UNITAMS or “Volker”, however, when they wanted to denounce a process that they believed undermined their interests. In contrast to their FFC (CC) colleagues, they went public when they had an issue with the TM’s approach, and sometimes accused the TM and UNITAMS in particular of being biased towards, or even controlling the FFC (CC). Certain representatives of the bloc had no qualms about asking for meetings with UNITAMS and the SRSG while at the same time disseminating fake news about them on social media. None of this prevented productive meetings with the FFC (DB); but it did become a challenge for UNITAMS’ and the TM’s own public communication efforts.

Public communication in the social media age was clearly a challenge for UNITAMS and the TM – as it is for the UN in general.⁵⁷ Social media discourse is dominated by the more strident voices, particularly on the political scene. Sudanese politicians were more active on social media platforms than many intellectuals or civil-society representatives; and social media chatter may have nurtured the somewhat skewed impression that the TM was spending most of its time with politicians and armed-group leaders.

As outlined above, both UNITAMS in the 2022 Consultations and the entire TM in its facilitator’s role worked intensively with organised and non-organised civil society, academics, businesspeople, religious and tribal leaders as well as activists, particularly from the resistance committees. The views of the resistance committees were clearly reflected in the Consultations. The Consultations also showed that the resis-

⁵⁷ See, among others: SIPRI Commentary, “Tackling Mis- and Disinformation: Seven Insights for UN Peace Operations”, 4 October 2023, www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2023/tackling-mis-and-disinformation-seven-insights-un-peace-operations; Jake Sherman and Albert Trithart, *Strategic Communication in UN Peace Operations: From an Afterthought to an Operational Necessity* (New York: International Peace Institute [IPI], August 2021), <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IPI-RPT-Strategic-Communications.pdf>.

tance committees enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy in the wider population, both for their role in bringing down the Bashir regime and for their resistance against the coup. Their views about the future of the country, however, and their rejection of talks with the military were not so widely shared. Some resistance committee representatives were sceptical of meeting with UNITAMS or the TM because of the latter's explicit efforts to support a negotiated way out of the political crisis. Many of those who did meet did not want this publicised — often out of a well-founded fear of retribution. This did not prevent regular contacts or the participation of resistance committee activists in the FPA follow-up workshops. Given the leaderless nature of the Committees, social-media spats about who represented the “real” resistance committees were commonplace. All political groups, ASMs, and even the military tried to benefit from the popularity of the Committees and brought their respective “resistance committee representatives” to the table. The TM, of course, avoided passing judgement on which of the groups of activists that were prepared to engage were real or less real resistance committees, but remained open to all of them.

As regards the third political bloc, the Islamic Current, it is highly unlikely that more contacts with the Islamist Movement or representatives of the NCP would have changed their principled stance against the political process and an expected return to civilian rule, or their uneasiness with the presence of a UN political mission. They had rejected the establishment of UNITAMS, and they did their best to undermine and eventually terminate it once they regained control over the Foreign Ministry after the 2021 coup. The Islamic Movement never left any doubt that they wanted the “Framework Agreement” and the follow-up talks between the Military Component and civilian leaders to fail, and did not want a new civilian government to take over as a result of this process. In hindsight, it might have been advisable for UNITAMS, AU or IGAD to have had more interaction with the Islamic Movement — above and beyond the cautious individual contacts and exchanges — if only to improve situational awareness and both sides' knowledge about each other. While this would have raised eyebrows among the political parties, civil society and activists, it might have helped to tone down the anti-UNITAMS campaign. It would certainly not have kept the Islamic Movement from trying to re-establish themselves in government through the military, though. Consequently, their

campaign was directed against any prospect of a military-civilian agreement that would subordinate the military — both SAF and RSF — to a new civilian government. Their influence in the Army and the administration has increased further since the beginning of the war. Some of the professional officers in the SAF appeared to become concerned about this influence and have spoken out against it,⁵⁸ not least, it seems, because of the Islamists' opposition to mediation efforts that some of the military brass had accepted.

58 “Kabbashi Warns against Political Exploitation of Sudan's Popular Resistance”, *Sudan Tribune*, 28 March 2024, <https://sudantribune.com/article283853/>.

Lessons

Do not underestimate the opposition

Seen from today, it appears that the international approach to Sudan after the fall of the Bashir regime was heavily shaped by a moment of pro-revolutionary optimism. This was also reflected in the mandate and resourcing of UNITAMS. The international community — specifically, the majority of Security Council members, the Friends of Sudan Group and other Western and Arab donors — saw the need to support and stabilise the transition agreed between the Sudanese military and their civilian counterparts. Economic assistance and technical support, not least for the Hamdok government’s efforts to receive debt relief, were not necessarily meeting expectations but still brought on the way in relative speed.⁵⁹ At the same time, the international community seems to have underestimated the strength of those who opposed a “political transition” — prospectively to democracy or, at least, a civilian government led by those who had opposed the old regime — and the influence of the Islamic Movement, the NCP, and their allies within and beyond the military. That regime had, after all, been in power for thirty years. And it had built a constituency with strong networks in the security apparatus, bureaucracy and business community that did not simply disappear with the fall of Bashir.

⁵⁹ The implementation of aid projects always takes “too long” in the eyes of recipient societies, so this in indeed “relative” — to processes in other countries. Notably, according to the IMF, Sudan reached “decision point” in the HIPC (Highly Indebted Poor Countries) process much more quickly than other countries. Donor countries made an effort to support this process as most visibly demonstrated in the Paris Conference 2021. See International Monetary Fund, “Sudan to Receive Debt Relief under the HIPC Initiative”, press release, 29 June 2021, www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/06/29/pr21199-sudan-to-receive-debt-relief-under-the-hipc-initiative.

The international community underestimated the strength of those who opposed a “political transition”.

In the civilian-military partnership phase, the Islamic Movement/NCP lay rather low, convinced, as individual contacts confided, that the Hamdok government would fail to manage the country’s economic and social challenges, and that the NCP or a successor party would win any elections at the end of the transition period. Following the October 2021 coup, they supported the military’s rule, which allowed their cadres to return to positions of influence or strengthen the influence they still wielded inside the security apparatus, administration and judiciary. They left no doubt that they would use any means, including violence, to undo the FPA and prevent a return to “civilian-led transition”,⁶⁰ and they were eager to weaken or end a UN mission that supported such a transition. After the war broke out, the NCP regime’s Islamist militias were reorganised to fight alongside the SAF. The Islamic Movement presented itself as the most hawkish element in the war which it stylised as “Battle of Dignity” — also by opposing a ceasefire and international efforts to end the war. The argument that the Islamists triggered the war on their own, however, falls short and deflects responsibility from those military leaders who had risked an armed conflict, and overoptimistically assumed that any confrontation would be short and easily won. But one key lesson for any future UN or international support for a political transition is certainly not to underestimate the strength of those who reject it.

Mandate and resources

UNITAMS was mandated and resourced to support what looked like an unchallenged transition, driven

⁶⁰ See, for example, the statements by two Islamist leaders in these videos: https://x.com/www_frd2010/status/1787813533675127074?s=12&t=0WbTYHI9KheIp2LaZ45Ab.

by the civilian government and its military partners, and backed by the international community. The mandate did not factor in a military coup – no mandate for a Special Political Mission (SPM) would – and a deteriorating political and security environment. Despite a rather broad range of mandate tasks, the Mission was designed to have a “light footprint”.⁶¹ Although was not grossly underresourced or understaffed, certain deficits became increasingly apparent during and after the coup. Despite the political nature of the Mission, with mandate to assist peace talks with rebel movements, a constitutional process, rule of law, and eventual elections, it did not, in contrast to other SPMs, have a deputy SRSG (DSRSG) for political affairs. Nor was a military advisor planned for. And the Mission had not finished its start-up phase when the transition it was supposed to support was ended by a military takeover. Budget renegotiations with the relevant UN institutions allowed the Mission to recruit military observers for the Darfur Ceasefire Committee and a military advisor. Without such expertise the Mission would have remained effectively “blind” on anything related to military events and developments, including the border dispute with Ethiopia and military movements in Darfur. The Mission was also able to bring in mediation design expertise from headquarters when it launched the Consultations in January 2022. In an ideal setting, such functions would be factored into the planning from the outset.

The UN needs to improve on countering strategic misinformation and disinformation.

One lesson that goes beyond Sudan is certainly that the UN needs to improve on countering strategic misinformation and disinformation. The production and dissemination of fake news about UNITAMS and personal attacks on its leadership increased after the fighting began, when the Mission relocated to Port Sudan. State radio and TV came under the control of the military following the coup, and occasionally joined such disinformation campaigns. Even before that, in a more benign environment, UNITAMS was unable to effectively counter social media campaigns,

⁶¹ Daniel Forti, *Walking a Tightrope: The Transition from UNAMID to UNITAMS* (New York: IPI, February 2021), 18–21, https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Walking_a_Tightrope_Sudan.pdf.

partly because the UN would not, as a rule, engage in media spats.

Another lesson is the need for future UN engagements to combine mission planning and strategic foresight. Foresight builds on scenario exercises and factors in historical trajectories and path dependencies such as the frequency of civil war or military coups. A deeper appreciation of this historical backdrop might have avoided some of the aforementioned deficits in the mission’s mandate and staffing.

Expectation gaps

The disparity between UNITAMS’ mandate and popular expectations concerning protection of civilians has already been mentioned.⁶² When the UNITAMS mandate came up for renewal in June 2022, Security Council members were unable to agree on new language reflecting the changed political environment. The Council therefore rolled the mandate over as it was, rather than adapting it. While this allowed the mission to continue its work, it also created another expectation gap, as the roll-over also applied to the mandated “strategic objective” of supporting the mobilisation of economic and development assistance. After the coup and the subsequent decision of most donor countries to suspend non-humanitarian support this task became unattainable. UNITAMS highlighted the consequences of that decision: Cutting parts of the officially non-humanitarian support, such as World Bank–led funding for the Family Support Program, still had humanitarian effects. Some funding was eventually unblocked through cooperation between UNITAMS, UN agencies, and donors. UNITAMS also mobilised limited amounts of humanitarian assistance from the UN’s own emergency funds. But the mission was left largely unable to deliver on an aspect of its mandate that both expressed and depended on the willingness of the international community to devote resources to the objective of supporting a political transition. Little wonder that Sudanese actors and certain international players

⁶² On the challenges of mandating a mission to support “civilian protection” without a mandate or resources to actually provide physical protection of civilians, see Forti, *Walking a Tightrope* (see note 61); and Dirk Druet, *United Nations Special Political Missions and Protection: A Principled Approach for Research and Policymaking* (New York: IPI, July 2021), <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/UN-Special-Political-Missions.pdf>.

then used the decrease in foreign aid as an argument against UNITAMS, accusing the mission of neglecting what they saw as its only relevant mandate objective for what they called “political activities”. None of this constituted a major obstacle to UNITAMS’ scope and activities in the post-coup period. But it raises the broader question – which lies outside the scope of this paper – of how the UN should deal with unconstitutional changes of government.⁶³

Working à trois

The general value of partnerships between UN missions and regional organisations, in particular the African Union, is widely acknowledged.⁶⁴ On the ground, UNITAMS’ concrete experience of partnering with a regional and a subregional organisation (AU and IGAD) was a learning exercise in itself with useful lessons for future cooperation between these and other international organisations. The success of such partnerships is highly contingent.

The TM’s facilitating role benefited from having no stake in or ownership over the FPA.

The TM showed its value at an early stage, when it pressed the military to create a conducive environment for a political process by lifting the state of emergency and releasing detainees. The TM’s own legitimacy and its ability to mobilise other international players to press the same messages certainly helped. But the TM’s initial attempt to bring all main stakeholders together for “Preparatory Talks” was marred by the lack of consensus among the Sudanese

about the problem that needed to be solved, and about the main conflict parties and stakeholders. Arguably, the TM could have resisted the perceived pressure of time and signals from member states that UNITAMS and its African partners were too slow, as well as internal ambitions to demonstrate quick initial success, and waited for a riper situation where at least the main antagonists would have requested the TM’s facilitation efforts. At this particular stage, the TM ended up being attacked by all parties, and experienced attempts to play its members off against one another. These challenges were overcome, and the TM worked most effectively, and smoothly, when it facilitated a process on which the main antagonists – the civilian and military signatories of the FPA – had agreed in order to reach a final agreement. The TM’s facilitating role certainly benefited from the fact that it had no stake of its own in and no ownership over the FPA.

The TM was able to offer personnel, logistical support, expertise and some finance to organise the five workshops. It convened representatives of the civilian and military signatories of the FPA to oversee the process, chaired committee meetings, and succeeded in getting the participants to agree on procedural and substantive matters despite their differences and divisions. It also managed to secure broad participation in the workshops, which extended beyond the FPA signatories and their respective constituencies, and it was able to shuttle between the signatories and other political forces that either were sceptical or rejected the process. The TM also maintained a coordination structure with other international players that were present on the ground.

The main value of the TM definitely lay in the added legitimacy which the partnership gave to the efforts of all three organisations. But it takes more than just the agreement of the UN and its regional partners to establish such a joint mechanism. Cooperation in the new format would not have taken off if the three organisations had not been mandated to achieve a common strategic goal – namely the return to constitutional, civilian government in Sudan. Imbalances between UNITAMS and the AU and IGAD missions presented challenges, but these were manageable. And the TM proved to be a functional instrument once the parties had developed trust in one another. The main lesson here is that such a “mechanism” requires time to find a common approach and design a process.

⁶³ The UN is grappling with this issue at different levels. See, for example, “In Hindsight: The Security Council and Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa”, *Security Council Report*, 1 July 2022, www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2022-07/in-hindsight-the-security-council-and-unconstitutional-changes-of-government-in-africa.php; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Soldiers and Citizens. Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa*, 14 July 2023, <https://www.undp.org/africa/publications/soldiers-and-citizens>.

⁶⁴ Starting with the HIPPO Report of 2015: “Report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People”, United Nations General Assembly/Security Council, A/70/95-S/2015/446.

International and regional support

UN good offices in general depend on support from the regional and international community. This was certainly so for UNITAMS' and its TM partners' efforts to facilitate a negotiated return to civilian rule. Here is not the place for an analysis of regional and international policies and priorities regarding Sudan. Most international actors that showed any interest in Sudan were supportive, at least on a declaratory level, of UNITAMS' good offices and of the TM's joint efforts to facilitate a political process.

UNITAMS had been established by a unanimous vote of the Security Council. It is often said that continuous, united support from the Security Council is vital for UN missions⁶⁵ – and UNITAMS proves the point. Thus, the Security Council's press statement after the coup of October 2021 and its call on the “military authorities to restore the civilian-led transitional government” certainly helped to demonstrate that UNITAMS' efforts to facilitate a process to that effect were totally within its mandate. The Security Council's statement arguably also made it easier to convince the military that they should not place obstacles in the way of the UNITAMS-led Consultations. Similarly, the press statement in which the Security Council welcomed the FPA in December 2022 gave additional legitimacy to the TM's efforts to facilitate the ensuing political process. Generally, though, the polarisation in the Security Council following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was also reflected in its deliberations on Sudan. Lack of unity in the Security Council was immediately felt on the ground as various actors sensed that the Mission was no longer fully backed by the entire body, and could more easily be challenged.

Almost all diplomatic missions in Sudan, including the P5 minus Russia, showed support for the political process that emerged from the FPA and for the TM's facilitation, at least through their presence at the workshops. EU, African, Troika and Quad representatives gave welcoming remarks, individual European and African states provided expert speakers, and UNITAMS was able to use member state funding for

⁶⁵ Among others: Denis M. Tull, *UN Peacekeeping in Africa: The End of a Cycle? Between Changing Warfare, Impossible Mandates and Geopolitics*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, August 2023 (Megatrends Afrika, Working Paper 07), 7, www.swp-berlin.org/assets/afrika/publications/MTA_working_paper/MTA_WP_07_Tull_UN_Peacekeeping.pdf.

the more costly aspects of facilitating the workshops. The United States and Saudi Arabia made their own efforts to bring the parties together at critical junctures, while the United States and the United Kingdom actively introduced ideas on the force integration issue. Only Egypt tried to initiate a parallel process and invited a substantial number of civilian actors to Cairo for an alternative gathering. Requests from the TM to refrain from this endeavour went unheeded.⁶⁶ As expected, the invitation was followed only by those who rejected the FPA or were not eager to see the military step aside, and had no follow-up.

Signalling support for what looked like a successful political process was one thing. Efforts to prevent the outbreak of armed conflict would have needed decisive, higher-level involvement by international actors with more influence than the UN. Arguably, only three states – the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – would have had a realistic chance of preventing a slide into war through their leverage over both leaders. The US, Saudi and UAE ambassadors in Sudan supported deescalation efforts. However, US political involvement never went beyond the level of assistant secretary of state. Nor did our attempts to get regional leaders to directly use their influence on Burhan and Hemedti get any positive response. Suggesting – as some commentators do – that Sudan's war was triggered by regional powers would again underplay the agency of Sudanese actors. It was not. Neither is it a proxy war.⁶⁷ But regional powers made no visible effort to prevent it either.

Since the outbreak of war, regional actors have arguably contributed to prolonging it by supplying arms and equipment to the warring parties.⁶⁸ The UAE has been seen as the main regional supporter of

⁶⁶ IGAD openly criticised the initiative as an opportunity for “forum shopping” and a platform for “spoilers”: “Official Statement [on] the Ongoing Political Process in Sudan”, 1137th Session of the African Union Peace and Security Council, 6 February 2023, <https://igad.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Update-on-the-Situation-in-Sudan-to-the-1137-AU-PSC-06.02.2023.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Gerrit Kurtz, “How (Not) to Talk about the War in Sudan”, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 22 April 2024 (Megatrends spotlight 30), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/mta-spotlight-30-how-not-to-talk-about-the-war-in-sudan>.

⁶⁸ “African Union: External Support Prolongs Sudan's War”, *Al Taghyeer*, 21 April 2024; <https://www.altaghyeer.info/en/2024/04/21/african-union-external-support-prolongs-sudans-war/>.

the RSF,⁶⁹ with Egypt (at least initially) and Iran (more recently) backing the SAF. Efforts to end the war would have greater chances of success if the parties were denied the resources required to continue it. This would require an effective arms embargo, but also an end to gold imports from Sudan through which both parties continue to finance their arms purchases.

69 Most press reports on this matter refer to the report of the UN Panel of Experts on Sudan of 15 January 2024: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/005/64/pdf/n2400564.pdf?token=Dws3IYJvCpCbpcYxY3&fe=true>. The UAE officially denied providing “any military, logistical, financial or political support to any faction in Sudan,” see “UAE Affirms Its Categorical Rejection of the Baseless Allegations Made by the Permanent Representative of Sudan in a Letter to UN Security Council”, *United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (online), 22 April 2024, <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2024/4/22/22-4-2024-yae-saudan>.

Conclusions: Opportunities and Limits

The three phases of UNITAMS's lifespan illustrate the opportunities and limits for a Special Political or Transition Assistance Mission to use its good offices in situations that fall outside the expected trajectory of its mandate.

Even during its startup phase, UNITAMS was able to co-facilitate peace negotiations between the government and a non-Juba-signatory rebel movement where both were interested in settling their conflict, working together with a state actor (South Sudan) as lead mediator. This basically involved a targeted contribution of resources — personnel and material support which UNITAMS was able to provide thanks to extra-budgetary member-state support. But it also allowed UN values and experience to be brought into the process design, for example by securing the participation of an independent women's delegation. Trust built with both the military and this particular rebel movement even allowed the Mission, at a later stage, to play a practical role in securing the release of detainees.

Following the coup, UNITAMS was well positioned and equipped to obtain consent for and lead a broad-based consultation process. The acceptance of this exercise by almost all political and societal actors as well as the military was certainly enhanced by the fact that UNITAMS was not claiming to lead a political process, but merely launching consultations among the entire spectrum of stakeholders in order to create the basis for such a process.

UNITAMS appears to have enjoyed a high level of credibility with civilian actors and, to a lesser extent, the military. After becoming the sole de-facto authority through the coup, the military leadership chose to tolerate the mission with its good-offices functions and its mandated role in promoting rule-of-law and human rights. They also used it as interlocutor and occasional sparring partner. The UN Secretary-General's reports and SRSG briefings to the Security Council were taken seriously, often criticised in

detail, but for the most part accepted as something that could not be ignored. Both the military and the ASMs apparently valued UNITAMS's good-offices role as chair of the Darfur Permanent Ceasefire Committee and state-level committees, and its efforts to keep these committees working even after the outbreak of war. Through its relations with both warring parties, UNITAMS was occasionally able to negotiate access for humanitarian actors, or the release of individual detainees, and at one point even to persuade one of the conflict parties to refrain from an impending attack on a city. Both militaries wanted to put themselves on the good side of the international community, and were therefore open to the UN's advocacy — but within the limits of what they considered negotiable in the moment.

The joint good-offices of the Trilateral Mechanism came to bear most effectively after the signing of the FPA in December 2022 — in its facilitation of the five workshops working towards a final political agreement. The first four workshops served their purpose in full. They widened the participation of political and social forces in the debate on issues generally seen as priorities for a renewed "transition", and they helped to find consensual language for a draft final agreement. The workshop on security sector reform was obviously less successful. Both the civilians and the military accepted the attempt by the TM and international partners to transform the underlying conflict between the SAF and RSF leaderships into a number of technical issues. Notably, all attempts to forge a textual compromise between the two military formations occurred outside the workshop. They were facilitated not by the TM, but in parallel settings under the auspices of a group of Sudanese civilians and of the US and UK embassies, with some inputs from the TM. Obviously, neither the workshop nor the separate attempts to reach a compromise on force integration succeeded in overcoming the intra-military power conflict.

The UNTAMS experience demonstrates how a relatively small Special Political Mission can adapt to rapidly changing environments and unplanned events. Could it have done better, or more, with the staff, the resources, and the partners it had? Probably. There is always room for improvement. But it could not, of course, control the events. Arguably, no UN mission would ever be able to stop two armies that are determined to fight – and certainly not without the support of more powerful regional and international players.

Abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
ASMs	Armed Struggle Movements
AU	African Union
CC	Central Committee
DB	Democratic Bloc
DSRSG	Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation (United Nations)
FFC	Forces for Freedom and Change
FPA	Framework Political Agreement
HIPC	Highly Indebted Poor Countries
HIPPO	High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IGAD	Inter-Governmental Authority on Development
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
IPI	International Peace Institute (New York)
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement
JPA	Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan
NC	National Charter
NCP	National Congress Party
PCC	Permanent Ceasefire Committee
PCP	Popular Congress Party
PSC	Peace and Security Committee (African Union)
RC/HC	Regional Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (UN)
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SBA	Sudanese Bar Association
SCF	Sudan Charter Forces
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SLA	Sudan Liberation Army
SLA-MM	Sudan Liberation Army (Minni Minawi)
SLA-TC	Sudan Liberation Army Transitional Council
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPM	Special Political Mission
SRSG	Special Representative of the Secretary-General
TM	Tripartite or Trilateral Mechanism
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNAMID	United Nations – African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNITAMS	United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission to Sudan
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

