

THE CRISIS OF REGIONAL MEDIATION: IGAD, NEUTRALITY CONTESTATION AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF PEACE INITIATIVES IN SUDAN'S CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of Study: This article critically examines the challenges faced by IGAD in the Sudan peace process from 2023 to 2026.

Problem Statement: The outbreak of war in Sudan in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) generated one of the gravest political and humanitarian crises in contemporary Africa. Since the beginning of the conflict, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) attempted to position itself as a central regional mediator in line with its historical role in peacebuilding within the Horn of Africa. However, IGAD's mediation initiatives encountered substantial resistance from the Sudanese Armed Forces, which accused the regional bloc of bias and questioned its neutrality, particularly regarding the role of Kenya and other member states. Simultaneously, the proliferation of competing mediation platforms—including the Jeddah process, African Union initiatives, United Nations diplomacy, neighboring state interventions, and bilateral tracks—produced fragmentation that weakened coordination and undermined coherent peacemaking efforts.

Methodology: Drawing upon theories of regionalism, mediation, and conflict resolution, the study analyzes the institutional limitations of IGAD, geopolitical rivalries among member states, contestation over neutrality, and the broader fragmentation of mediation architecture in Sudan.

Result: The findings revealed that IGAD's difficulties reflect deeper structural weaknesses affecting African regional organizations in complex intrastate conflicts where member states possess divergent interests and external powers actively shape conflict dynamics.

Conclusion: The study proposes institutional reforms aimed at strengthening regional mediation mechanisms, enhancing legitimacy, improving coordination among mediators, and fostering inclusive Sudanese-led peace processes.

Keywords: *IGAD, Sudan conflict, mediation, neutrality, regional organizations*

INTRODUCTION

The war that erupted in Sudan on 15 April 2023 marked a decisive turning point in the political trajectory of the country and significantly destabilized the Horn of Africa and the broader East African region (International Crisis Group, 2024, pp. 2–5). The conflict emerged from escalating tensions between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, commonly known as Hemedti (Pospisil, 2023, pp. 3–7). Initially triggered by disputes concerning security sector reform and the integration of the RSF into the national military structure, the confrontation rapidly evolved into a nationwide civil war characterized by massive civilian casualties, displacement, institutional collapse, and regional insecurity (United Nations, 2024, pp. 4–8).

The humanitarian consequences of the conflict have been devastating. Millions of civilians have been displaced internally and externally, infrastructure has been destroyed, famine conditions have emerged in several regions, and state institutions have deteriorated substantially (United Nations, 2024, pp. 9–14). The conflict has also intensified regional instability by affecting neighboring countries through refugee flows, cross-border insecurity, economic disruption, and geopolitical polarization (Institute for Security Studies, 2025, pp. 11–13). As a result, multiple regional and international actors sought to mediate the crisis and facilitate ceasefire arrangements.

Among these actors, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) assumed a prominent role. Historically, IGAD has been involved in several major peace processes in the Horn of Africa, including mediation efforts in Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia (Ylönen, 2014, pp. 15–19). The organization has often presented itself as a regional mechanism capable of providing “African solutions to African problems” (Menkhaus, 2014, pp. 304–306). In the Sudan crisis, IGAD attempted to convene negotiations, facilitate dialogue, and coordinate diplomatic efforts aimed at ending hostilities.

Despite these ambitions, IGAD encountered unprecedented challenges. Most notably, the Sudanese Armed Forces questioned the neutrality and legitimacy of IGAD’s mediation efforts. The SAF openly criticized Kenya’s involvement within the IGAD mediation framework, accusing Nairobi of favoring the RSF and interfering in Sudan’s internal affairs (African Union, 2024, pp. 6–7). This contestation significantly undermined the credibility of the organization and weakened its ability to function as an impartial mediator.

Furthermore, the Sudan peace process became increasingly fragmented due to the emergence of multiple mediation tracks involving the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN), Saudi Arabia and the United States through the Jeddah initiative, neighboring states, and various bilateral diplomatic interventions (Ghebremeskel, 2024, pp. 101–104). Instead of complementing one another, these mediation efforts frequently overlapped, competed, and generated contradictory political incentives for the warring parties (Logo & Mariani, 2022, pp. 12–17).

This article investigates the challenges faced by IGAD in the Sudan peace process from 2023 to 2026. Specifically, the paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

- i. What institutional and political challenges did IGAD face in mediating the Sudan conflict?
- ii. Why did the Sudanese Armed Forces reject IGAD’s neutrality?
- iii. How did the fragmentation of mediation initiatives affect peace efforts in Sudan?
- iv. What lessons can be drawn for regional mediation frameworks in Africa?

The article argued that IGAD's difficulties in Sudan were not merely operational but structural. The organization's mediation efforts were constrained by internal divisions among member states, weak enforcement mechanisms, geopolitical competition, questions surrounding neutrality, and the absence of coherent coordination among regional and international actors. Consequently, the Sudan crisis exposed broader limitations within African regional peace architectures.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- i. To examine the institutional, political, and diplomatic challenges that constrained IGAD's mediation efforts during the Sudan conflict.
- ii. To analyse the political and strategic factors that influenced the Sudanese Armed Forces' rejection of IGAD's neutrality.
- iii. To investigate how competing mediation initiatives affected the effectiveness of peace negotiations in Sudan.
- iv. To assess the implications of fragmented mediation architecture for regional peace and security in the Horn of Africa.
- v. To propose institutional and policy reforms aimed at strengthening African regional mediation mechanisms in future peace processes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- i. What institutional and political challenges did IGAD encounter while mediating the Sudan conflict between 2023 and 2026?
- ii. Why did the Sudanese Armed Forces reject IGAD as a neutral mediator?
- iii. How did the emergence of multiple mediation initiatives affect the coherence and effectiveness of peace negotiations?
- iv. What institutional lessons can African regional organisations learn from Sudan's mediation experience?
- v. What reforms are necessary to strengthen regional mediation within the Horn of Africa?

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

- H₁:** Perceptions of mediator bias significantly reduced the legitimacy and effectiveness of IGAD's mediation efforts.
- H₂:** Internal political divisions among IGAD member states weakened institutional cohesion and diplomatic effectiveness.
- H₃:** Fragmentation of regional and international mediation initiatives prolonged the conflict by reducing coordination among peace actors.
- H₄:** Strengthening institutional neutrality and coordination mechanisms would significantly improve the effectiveness of African regional mediation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Regionalism and Regional Security Complex Theory

The study was informed by Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), advanced by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. The theory argues that security dynamics are clustered geographically, meaning that neighboring states are interconnected through shared security concerns (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 40–44). In the Horn of Africa, conflicts in one country often generate regional consequences affecting neighboring states. The Sudan conflict exemplifies this regional

interconnectedness. Refugee flows, cross-border arms trafficking, economic disruption, and geopolitical rivalry have affected Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Egypt, and other neighboring countries (International Crisis Group, 2024, pp. 8–10). Consequently, IGAD's involvement reflects the regionalization of security management within the Horn of Africa.

However, RSCT also highlights how neighboring states may simultaneously act as mediators and interested parties. This duality creates tensions between collective regional interests and individual state interests (Menkhaus, 2014, pp. 309–312). In Sudan's case, several IGAD member states possessed strategic interests that undermined perceptions of neutrality.

Mediation Theory

Mediation theory emphasizes the role of third parties in facilitating negotiations between conflicting actors. Successful mediation often depends upon mediator credibility, impartiality, leverage, and the willingness of parties to engage constructively (Zartman, 2008, pp. 27–31). The concept of neutrality occupies a central place in mediation theory. While absolute neutrality may be impossible, mediators are generally expected to maintain procedural fairness and avoid overt alignment with one party (Nathan, 1999, pp. 3–5). When mediators are perceived as biased, parties may reject mediation initiatives altogether.

The Sudanese Armed Forces' rejection of IGAD mediation illustrates how perceptions of bias can significantly undermine peace processes. The SAF viewed certain IGAD member states as politically aligned with rival actors, thereby weakening trust in the organization. The concept of neutrality occupies a central place in mediation theory. While absolute neutrality may be impossible, mediators are generally expected to maintain procedural fairness and avoid overt alignment with one party. When mediators are perceived as biased, parties may reject mediation initiatives altogether.

Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism argues that international and regional institutions can facilitate cooperation by providing frameworks for dialogue, reducing uncertainty, and promoting collective problem-solving. IGAD represents such an institutional arrangement aimed at enhancing regional peace and security. Nevertheless, liberal institutionalism also recognizes institutional limitations. Institutions depend upon member-state cooperation, political commitment, and resource capacity. Where member states pursue competing geopolitical interests, institutional effectiveness becomes compromised.

Historical Background of IGAD and Conflict Mediation

Formation and Evolution of IGAD

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) originated in 1986 as the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD), primarily focusing on drought, environmental degradation, and food security in the Horn of Africa (IGAD, 2023, pp. 1–3). In 1996, the organization was reconstituted as IGAD with an expanded mandate encompassing peace, security, economic integration, and regional cooperation. IGAD comprises Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, and Eritrea. Over time, the organization increasingly became involved in conflict mediation due to the persistent instability characterizing the region.

IGAD's Role in Sudan and South Sudan

IGAD played a significant role in the Sudan peace process during the civil war between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). The organization facilitated negotiations that culminated in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005 (Young, 2012, pp. 65–71). The CPA represented one of IGAD's most prominent diplomatic achievements. However, critics argue that external powers, particularly Western governments, played decisive roles behind the scenes (Ylönen, 2014, pp. 22–26). Nonetheless, the agreement elevated IGAD's profile as a regional peacemaker.

Subsequently, IGAD became heavily involved in South Sudan's peace processes following the outbreak of civil war in 2013. Although the organization brokered agreements such as the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), implementation challenges persisted (Verjee, 2021, pp. 564–568). IGAD played a significant role in the Sudan peace process during the civil war between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). The organization facilitated negotiations that culminated in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005.

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These earlier interventions exposed structural weaknesses within IGAD, including:

- i. Divergent interests among member states;
- ii. Weak enforcement mechanisms;
- iii. Dependence on external actors;
- iv. Limited financial and institutional capacity;
- v. Perceptions of elite-centered mediation.

These weaknesses later resurfaced during the crisis in Sudan crisis in 2023.

The Sudan Conflict and the Emergence of Competing Mediation Initiatives

Origins of the 2023 Sudan War

The roots of the Sudan war can be traced to the post-2019 political transition following the removal of President Omar al-Bashir. The transitional arrangement between civilian actors and military elites remained fragile and contested. Tensions intensified after the October 2021 military coup led jointly by Burhan and Hemedti, which disrupted the democratic transition. Although both leaders initially cooperated against civilian forces, disagreements later emerged regarding security sector reform, command structures, and timelines for integrating the RSF into the national army. The political framework agreement signed in December 2022 failed to resolve these disputes. By April 2023, armed confrontation erupted in Khartoum and rapidly expanded across the country.

Multiplicity of Mediation Processes

The Sudan conflict generated numerous mediation efforts involving different actors and platforms. These included:

- i. IGAD-led mediation initiatives;
- ii. The African Union mediation framework;
- iii. The Jeddah process led by Saudi Arabia and the United States;

- iv. United Nations diplomatic efforts;
- v. Bilateral interventions by neighboring states;
- vi. Informal diplomatic engagements by Gulf states;
- vii. Civil society initiatives.

Although the existence of multiple mediators could theoretically create diplomatic momentum, in practice it produced fragmentation and competition. The Jeddah talks focused primarily on humanitarian ceasefires and military negotiations, while IGAD attempted broader political mediation. The African Union sought to coordinate continental responses, yet overlaps persisted. Neighboring states pursued their own strategic interests through bilateral channels.

This fragmented architecture created confusion regarding legitimacy, sequencing, representation, and enforcement.

Challenges Faced by IGAD in the Sudan Peace Process

Contestation of Neutrality

One of the most significant challenges confronting IGAD was the Sudanese Armed Forces' rejection of the organization's neutrality. The SAF accused certain IGAD member states, particularly Kenya, of favoring the RSF and undermining Sudanese sovereignty. The dispute intensified after Kenyan President William Ruto became actively involved in regional diplomatic efforts. Sudanese authorities criticized Kenya for allegedly hosting RSF-linked political activities and for maintaining positions perceived as sympathetic to Hemedti.

As a result, Sudan suspended its participation in IGAD meetings at different points during the mediation process. This development severely weakened the organization's legitimacy and undermined diplomatic engagement. The neutrality crisis reflected broader structural dilemmas affecting regional mediation. Unlike distant international mediators, neighboring states often possess direct political, economic, and security interests in conflicts. Consequently, mediation efforts become vulnerable to accusations of bias.

Internal Divisions among IGAD Member States

IGAD member states held divergent positions regarding the Sudan conflict. Egypt strongly supported the SAF due to longstanding military and strategic relations with Burhan's faction. Other states maintained varying degrees of engagement with competing actors. These divisions constrained IGAD's ability to formulate a coherent regional strategy. Instead of presenting unified diplomatic pressure, the organization became entangled in geopolitical rivalries (Wol 2014). The Horn of Africa itself is characterized by complex interstate tensions involving Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan. These tensions weakened collective action within IGAD and reduced institutional cohesion.

Limited Institutional Capacity

IGAD also faced serious institutional limitations. The organization lacks sufficient financial resources, logistical infrastructure, and enforcement mechanisms necessary for sustained conflict mediation. Unlike larger international organizations, IGAD depends heavily upon donor funding and external partnerships. This dependency affects institutional autonomy and operational effectiveness. Additionally, IGAD lacks robust peace enforcement capabilities. While it can facilitate negotiations and issue communiqués, it possesses limited means to compel compliance

by armed actors. The Sudan conflict demonstrated that mediation without enforcement mechanisms is often insufficient in highly militarized conflicts.

Dependence on External Actors

IGAD's mediation efforts were heavily intertwined with external actors including the United States, Saudi Arabia, the African Union, and the United Nations. While external support can strengthen regional initiatives, excessive dependence may undermine local ownership and institutional legitimacy. In Sudan, external powers often pursued competing priorities, including counterterrorism cooperation, Red Sea security, migration management, and geopolitical influence. Consequently, mediation efforts lacked coherence and strategic alignment.

Exclusion of Civilian Actors

Another major challenge was the marginalization of Sudanese civilian actors. Many mediation initiatives prioritized military negotiations between the SAF and RSF while excluding civil society organizations, women's groups, resistance committees, and democratic activists. This exclusion weakened the legitimacy of peace initiatives and reproduced elite-centered bargaining structures. Civilian groups frequently criticized regional and international mediators for treating Sudan's crisis primarily as a power-sharing dispute between armed factions rather than a broader struggle over democratic transformation and state restructuring.

The Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rejection of IGAD Neutrality

Political Dimensions of Neutrality Contestation

The SAF's rejection of IGAD neutrality was not merely procedural but deeply political. By contesting the legitimacy of mediation, the SAF sought to shape the diplomatic environment and strengthen its bargaining position. Rejecting certain mediators enabled the SAF to delegitimize initiatives perceived as unfavorable while promoting alternative frameworks more aligned with its strategic interests. The SAF preferred mediation arrangements where it retained greater influence and where state sovereignty was emphasized. This preference partly explains its greater openness toward some bilateral and Arab-led initiatives compared to IGAD.

Kenya and Diplomatic Tensions

Kenya became central to the neutrality dispute. Sudan accused Nairobi of partiality and objected to President Ruto's role within IGAD mediation structures. The Sudanese government argued that Kenya had overstepped diplomatic boundaries by allegedly supporting rival political actors. In response, Sudan downgraded diplomatic engagement with Kenya and questioned its suitability as a mediator. This dispute reflected broader regional rivalries and competing visions regarding Sudan's future.

Sovereignty and Regional Intervention

The SAF also framed its rejection of IGAD within the discourse of sovereignty and non-interference. Sudanese military leaders argued that some mediation initiatives infringed upon Sudan's internal affairs. This position resonates with longstanding tensions in African diplomacy between sovereignty and humanitarian intervention. Regional organizations often struggle to balance respect for state sovereignty with the need to address mass violence and instability.

Fragmentation of Mediation Initiatives

Competing Diplomatic Tracks

The Sudan peace process became increasingly fragmented as multiple actors pursued parallel initiatives. The Jeddah process emphasized ceasefires and humanitarian access, while IGAD attempted political dialogue. The African Union promoted continental coordination, whereas neighboring states pursued bilateral diplomacy.

This multiplicity produced several negative consequences:

- i. Conflicting negotiation agendas;
- ii. Forum shopping by warring parties;
- iii. Duplication of diplomatic efforts;
- iv. Weak implementation mechanisms;
- v. Reduced accountability.

Armed actors exploited these divisions strategically. By engaging selectively with different mediators, the SAF and RSF avoided sustained pressure and delayed meaningful compromise.

Geopolitical Competition

External geopolitical rivalries further intensified fragmentation. Gulf states, Western powers, Egypt, Ethiopia, and other actors possessed competing interests in Sudan. The Red Sea's strategic importance increased international involvement. Sudan's geographic position and resource wealth attracted external attention, transforming the conflict into a site of geopolitical competition. As a result, mediation efforts became entangled in broader regional and global rivalries.

Institutional Overlap between IGAD, AU, and UN

Another challenge involved institutional overlap among IGAD, the African Union, and the United Nations. Although cooperation frameworks existed, practical coordination remained weak. Differences in mandates, diplomatic strategies, and political priorities complicated unified action. The absence of a clear lead mediator contributed to confusion and inefficiency.

Impact on Peacebuilding

Fragmentation weakened prospects for sustainable peacebuilding. Instead of producing coordinated pressure for ceasefire implementation and political transition, mediation initiatives often generated contradictory incentives. Furthermore, fragmented diplomacy undermined public confidence in peace efforts. Sudanese civilians increasingly viewed mediation initiatives as disconnected from realities on the ground.

Comparative Perspectives: Lessons from South Sudan and Ethiopia

South Sudan

IGAD's experiences in South Sudan provide important comparative insights. In South Sudan, mediation efforts also faced accusations of bias, elite-centered negotiations, and member-state interference. Uganda's military involvement in South Sudan while simultaneously participating in regional mediation raised questions regarding neutrality. Similarly, rivalries among Ethiopia, Sudan, and Uganda complicated collective diplomacy. The South Sudan case demonstrates that regional organizations composed of neighboring states frequently struggle to separate mediation from geopolitical interests.

Ethiopia's Tigray Conflict

The Tigray conflict in Ethiopia similarly highlighted the limitations of regional mediation frameworks. IGAD played a relatively limited role due to Ethiopia's resistance to external involvement. This illustrates another structural constraint facing regional organizations: powerful member states may resist mediation altogether. Together, these cases suggest that IGAD's challenges in Sudan reflect broader patterns affecting regional conflict management in the Horn of Africa.

Implications for Regional Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa

Regional Destabilization

The Sudan conflict has generated severe regional consequences. Refugee flows into Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Central African Republic have intensified humanitarian pressures. Cross-border arms trafficking and militia movements have increased insecurity throughout the region. Economic disruptions have also affected trade corridors, food supply chains, and regional integration initiatives.

Crisis of Regional Multilateralism

The Sudan crisis exposed a broader crisis of regional multilateralism in Africa. Regional organizations increasingly face difficulties managing complex intrastate conflicts involving multiple armed actors and external powers. The inability of IGAD to maintain a coherent mediation framework undermined confidence in regional diplomacy.

Erosion of "African Solutions to African Problems"

The fragmentation of mediation initiatives also challenged the notion of "African solutions to African problems." While regional ownership remains important, institutional weaknesses and geopolitical rivalries have complicated implementation. External actors continue to play influential roles in African peace processes, often shaping outcomes through financial, military, and diplomatic leverage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening Institutional Neutrality

IGAD should establish clearer institutional guidelines concerning mediation neutrality. Mechanisms should be developed to minimize the dominance of individual member states within peace processes. Independent mediation panels composed of respected African diplomats and technical experts could enhance credibility.

Enhancing Coordination among Mediators

The African Union, IGAD, the United Nations, and external actors should develop integrated coordination frameworks to avoid duplication and competition. A unified mediation architecture with clearly defined mandates could reduce fragmentation.

Inclusion of Civilian Actors

Future peace processes must prioritize the inclusion of Sudanese civilian actors, including women's organizations, youth movements, professional associations, and resistance committees.

Inclusive participation enhances legitimacy and increases prospects for sustainable peace.

Developing Enforcement Mechanisms

Regional organizations require stronger enforcement capacities. Diplomatic initiatives without enforcement mechanisms often fail in militarized conflicts. Targeted sanctions, monitoring systems, and coordinated international pressure may improve compliance.

Reforming IGAD's Institutional Capacity

IGAD requires substantial institutional reform to enhance financial independence, technical expertise, and operational effectiveness. Member states should increase financial contributions to reduce dependency on external donors.

Promoting Preventive Diplomacy

The Sudan crisis demonstrates the importance of preventive diplomacy. Regional organizations should invest more heavily in early warning systems, conflict prevention, and political dialogue before conflicts escalate into full-scale war.

CONCLUSION

The Sudan conflict from 2023 onward represents one of the most complex and destructive crises in contemporary Africa. IGAD's attempts to mediate the conflict exposed both the potential and the limitations of regional peace architectures within the Horn of Africa. The organization faced severe challenges including accusations of bias, internal member-state divisions, institutional weaknesses, geopolitical competition, and fragmented mediation frameworks. The Sudanese Armed Forces' rejection of IGAD neutrality significantly undermined the organization's legitimacy and complicated diplomatic engagement.

At the same time, the proliferation of competing mediation initiatives weakened coherence and allowed armed actors to exploit diplomatic fragmentation. Rather than generating coordinated pressure for peace, overlapping mediation tracks often reinforced strategic maneuvering by conflict parties. The Sudan case illustrates broader structural problems confronting African regional organizations. Neighboring states frequently possess strategic interests that complicate neutrality, while institutional weaknesses limit enforcement capacity. Moreover, external geopolitical rivalries increasingly shape African peace processes.

Nevertheless, regional organizations remain indispensable for conflict management in Africa. The challenge is not whether organizations like IGAD should mediate conflicts, but how they can reform institutional structures, strengthen legitimacy, enhance coordination, and promote genuinely inclusive peace processes. Future mediation efforts in Sudan and across the Horn of Africa must prioritize civilian participation, institutional coherence, preventive diplomacy, and stronger mechanisms of accountability. Without such reforms, regional mediation risks becoming increasingly fragmented, politicized, and ineffective.

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