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FROM ARCHITECTURE TO ECOSYSTEM: REPOLITICISING MEDIATION IN SUDAN'S FRAGMENTED PEACE LANDSCAPE

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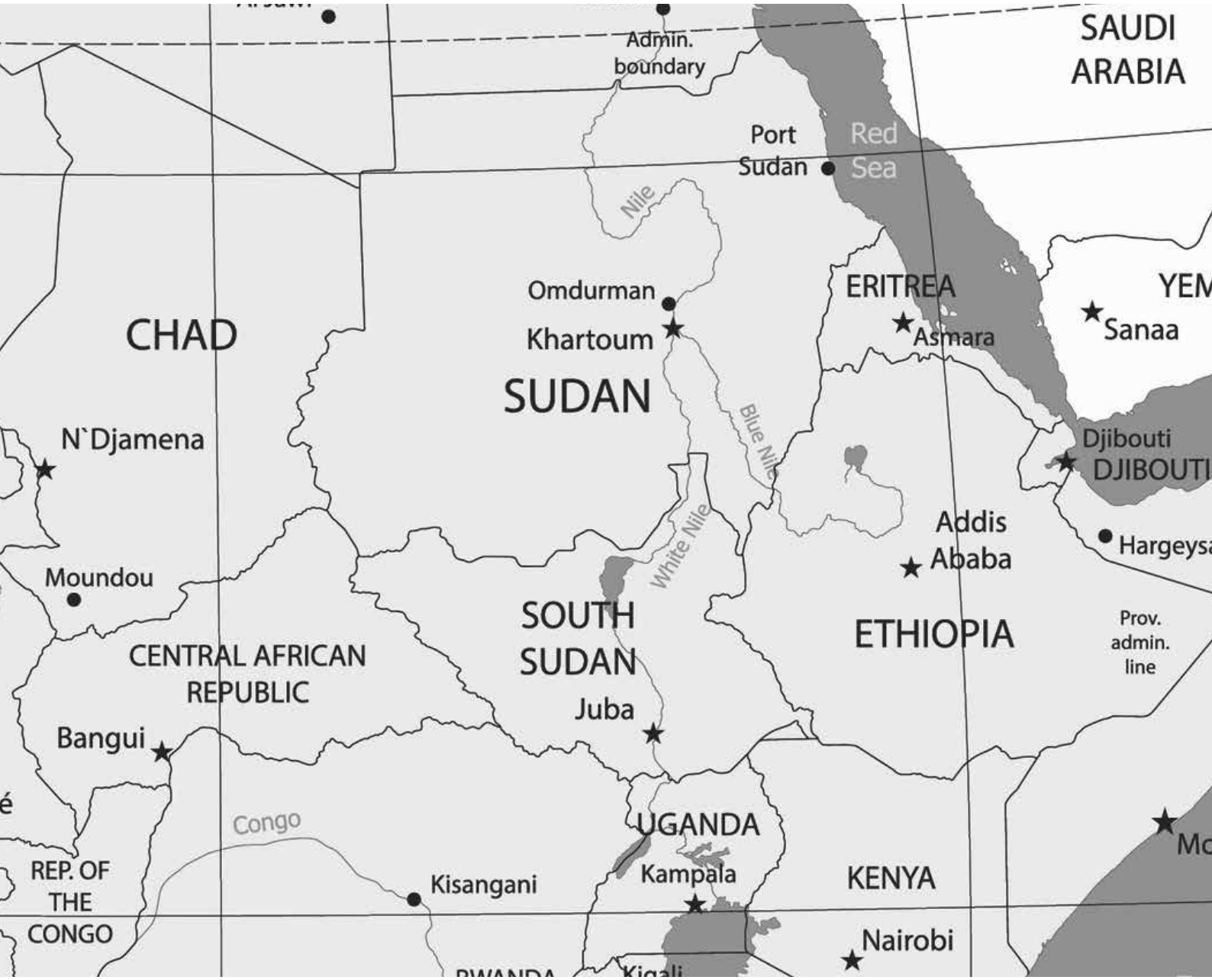

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Introduction: Why Sudan Forces to Rethink Mediation

Sudan presents a configuration of armed conflict and peacemaking that exposes the limits of established mediation thinking. Since the outbreak of large-scale violence in April 2023, the war has become deeply regionalised. External actors shape military dynamics, political calculations, and economic lifelines. What distinguishes the current war in Sudan from earlier wars in the country and other conflict contexts, however, is the way mediation itself has become part of this internationalised contestation. A significant number of regional and international actors who are directly implicated in the conflict simultaneously position themselves as mediators or sponsors of mediation initiatives. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Kenya can be named as only three examples. Mediation has turned into a political instrument used within wider struggles for regional and global hegemony.

This utilisation of mediation matters because it alters its function in fundamental ways. Mediation initiatives cannot be understood anymore as external interventions applied to a conflict. They are embedded within the conflict's political economy and diplomatic environment. Actors engage in such efforts mainly to secure access and leverage, and to demonstrate relevance in a shifting international order that tends to regionalise.[1] In such an order, mediation formats and venues signal political positioning as much as they signal commitment to peace. This effectively prevents the establishment of a unified mediation process. Initiatives coexist as parallel and sometimes competing efforts, shaped by the strategic interests of those who organises them.

This situation is not adequately captured by existing mediation frameworks. The dominant response has been to treat Sudan's mediation landscape as disorganised or dysfunctional, leading to repeated demands for coordination, harmonisation, and a recognised lead mediator.[2] These demands assume that coherence is both possible and desirable, and that fragmentation reflects failure. Sudan suggests otherwise. The proliferation of mediation efforts is not an anomaly to be corrected. It reflects the structural conditions of a conflict embedded in regional rivalries and global political shifts. Attempts to impose coherence risk misunderstanding the political role mediation now plays in such environments.

What is at stake is not the discovery that mediation is political, which in itself has long been evident, but the fact that mediation in Sudan unfolds as a multiplicity of concurrent initiatives that cannot be reduced to a single process or sequence. Any engagement in this environment functions as one dynamic element within a broader field of mediation activity, shaped by other efforts that run in parallel, partially intersect, and compete for relevance.

Mediation and dialogue initiatives in Sudan do not move through clearly demarcated stages, nor does it converge towards a shared centre. The approach developed in this paper starts from this practical condition. It treats mediation not as a unified process to be aligned, but as a multi-mediation[3] environment in which individual

1 Flockhart, The coming multi-order world, 3-30.

2 See, for instance, the meeting records of the 9394th meeting of the UN Security Council on 9 August 2023, stating: 'Coordination between the existing regional and international mechanisms and forums remains essential to maximize the collective leverage of regional and international actors and enhance the effectiveness of mediation efforts.' (p. 3).

3 Bell, 'Multimediation', 27-30

engagements must be assessed in relation to the wider landscape they inhabit.

These reflections start from the premise that Sudan is not an outlier but an early and pronounced example of a broader transformation in conflict mediation. Mediation in such contexts must be understood as an ecosystem of initiatives, rather than as a designed and coordinated process. Within this ecosystem, legitimacy does not derive from formal mandates. It emerges from how engagement is conducted, from the political seriousness of the dialogue, and from the endurance of relationships maintained under conditions of uncertainty.

The working paper provides the conceptual grounding for an ongoing Sudan dialogue initiative that operates within this environment. It does not present that work as a model or a case study. Instead, it uses Sudan as the lens through which the limits of prevailing mediation assumptions become visible, and through which alternative ways of thinking about mediation, and political engagement in more general terms, can be developed.

Fragmentation as Condition, Not Failure: Mediation in Sudan's Regionalised War

Experts and observers describe the mediation landscape surrounding Sudan commonly as fragmented. This assessment is usually followed by a diagnosis of dysfunction: too many actors, too many initiatives, insufficient coordination. Such considerations assume that fragmentation reflects a breakdown of otherwise workable mediation models. Sudan suggests a different reading. The proliferation of mediation efforts is not the result of organisational failure or poor design. It is the direct outcome of a conflict that is deeply embedded in regional political competition and global realignment.[4]

Sudan's war is shaped by external involvement at nearly every level. Military support, financial flows, diplomatic protection, and humanitarian access are all influenced by actors beyond Sudan's borders. These very same actors also engage in and sometimes even lead mediation initiatives, often while maintaining direct or indirect links to the conflict parties. This overlap is not coincidental. Mediation provides diplomatic visibility and offers a channel through which influence can be exercised without formal commitment.[5] In this environment, mediation initiatives emerge wherever political interest exists. The result is a field of engagement in which multiple initiatives are generated by diverse political incentives.

Treating this situation as a coordination problem misidentifies its cause. Fragmentation in Sudan does not stem from a lack of leadership or insufficient institutional capacity. It reflects the absence of a shared political horizon among external actors. No actor or coalition of actors is able, or willing, to impose a settlement framework that others accept. Under these conditions, calls for harmonisation are aspirational rather than operational. They presuppose a level of political convergence that does not exist.

The insistence on coordination also rests on an assumption about how mediation should function. Conventional mediation frameworks assume that parallel initiatives weaken one another unless they are aligned. Empirical experiences from the past, such as Northern Ireland or the Philippines, challenge this assumption. Multiple initiatives resulted

4 de Waal, The War That Outgrew Sudan
5 de Waal, The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa, 1-5

in multiple outcomes at different levels that often were impossible to predict. Mediation efforts in Sudan continue despite the lack of alignment, and in some cases because of it. Initiatives persist exactly because they serve distinct political purposes. Some maintain communication channels. Others signal diplomatic engagement. Others keep specific actors in political circulation. These functions are rarely acknowledged as such, yet they shape the persistence of mediation activity more than formal mandates or process design.

This does not imply that all mediation initiatives in Sudan are equally valuable or legitimate. Fragmentation does not neutralise questions of quality or conduct. It does, however, shift the basis on which mediation should be assessed. If fragmentation is treated as a condition rather than a deviation, the relevant question is no longer how initiatives can be aligned, but how they interact within a shared political environment. The focus moves from coordination to coexistence, from sequencing to endurance.

Seen in this way, Sudan peacemaking – from grassroots dialogues to high-level summits – illustrates a broader transformation in mediation practice. The idea that peace processes move through identifiable stages, led by a recognised mediator, is increasingly detached from political reality in conflicts shaped by regional competition. Processes unfold through accumulation rather than progression. Initiatives emerge, pause, resume, and intersect without converging.

From Architecture to Ecosystem: Rethinking Mediation Practice

Prevailing mediation approaches are built around the idea of architecture. They assume that peace processes can be structured and roles can be clearly allocated. This logic remains influential in policy debates. Calls for coordination, sequencing, and leadership presuppose that mediation works best when organised around a lead partner.

In reality, mediation and dialogue initiatives do not operate within an identifiable structure but as a competitive enterprise.[6] There is no agreed framework that orders initiatives, no authority that defines progression, and no shared understanding of how individual efforts relate to one another. Attempts to impose architectural coherence have not produced sustained political traction.[7] They have instead narrowed the space for engagement by privileging form over function. Mediation efforts continue to proliferate, but they do so outside the parameters assumed by architectural thinking.

The concept of an ecosystem provides a more accurate description of how mediation unfolds in this environment.[8] An ecosystem does not require a centre or a unified design. It consists of multiple initiatives that coexist within the same political space. These initiatives affect one another through proximity and interaction rather than coordination. Some reinforce each other indirectly. There is relation, yet not necessarily coherence.[9] Others remain disconnected. Some lose

6 Clayton et al., What Is Peace Mediation?

7 Vines, A decade of African Peace and Security Architecture, 89-109

8 Bell, 'Multimediation', 27-30

9 Chandler and Pugh, Critique beyond Relation

relevance and fade. New ones emerge in response to shifts in political interest. The overall field remains in motion.

This understanding reflects practical experience in Sudan. Mediation initiatives persist even when they do not feed into a recognised process. Engagement continues because actors value access, continuity, and political presence. Dialogue formats are maintained to keep relationships intact, to develop and test positions, or to prevent exclusion from future negotiations. These functions are rarely acknowledged in formal mediation discourse, yet they explain why initiatives endure despite the absence of convergence.

Legitimacy plays a central role in this shift.[10] In architectural models, legitimacy is tied to recognition. Mandates, endorsements, and inclusion within a formal process are treated as markers of authority. These markers have limited explanatory power. Many formally recognised initiatives fail to generate trust or political movement. At the same time, less visible engagements sustain dialogue and influence positioning without formal recognition.

Within a mediation ecosystem, legitimacy emerges from conduct rather than status. It develops through sustained engagement, political seriousness, and restraint in the use of mediation as a resource. Participants assess initiatives based on whether they provide space for meaningful exchange, whether they respect agency, and whether they avoid instrumentalising dialogue for external agendas. These judgements are made over time and through experience, not through formal validation.

This has consequences for how mediation practice is evaluated. Architectural thinking treats overlap and redundancy as inefficiency. Ecosystem thinking treats them as features of political environments where no single pathway is available. The question shifts from whether initiatives align to whether they contribute to maintaining political space. Some initiatives do so by enabling coordination among civilian actors. Others keep communication open with armed groups. Others prevent exclusion from future processes. These contributions are partial and uneven, yet they shape the overall environment in which political settlement remains possible.

Understanding mediation as an ecosystem does not imply acceptance of disorder. It requires a different form of discipline. Instead of designing processes, mediators must situate their engagement within a crowded field. Instead of seeking alignment, they must consider how their actions affect the positions and options of others. Instead of prioritising visibility, they must attend to durability. These considerations are practical rather than theoretical. They arise from working within an environment where mediation cannot be planned as a sequence and cannot be owned by a single actor.

Peace Mediation in the Context of Fragmentation

The track-based model of mediation has long provided a convenient way to classify engagement in conflict settings.[11] By distinguishing between official negotiations, informal elite dialogues, civil society initiatives and the grassroots, the Track I / II / III framework promised clarity and division

10 Principles for Peace, Legitimacy in a Fragmenting World, 36–44

11 Fisher, Ury and Patton, Getting to yes

of labour.[12] It assumed that different forms of engagement serve distinct functions and that their combined effect produces momentum towards settlement. This assumption no longer holds in many contemporary conflict environments.

Track distinctions rely on a stable separation between formal authority and informal influence. That separation has eroded. Political authority is fragmented, representation is contested, and access to decision-making rarely follows formal hierarchies. In such conditions, mediation initiatives cannot be neatly assigned to tracks without misrepresenting what they do. Engagement often combines elements associated with different tracks within a single process. Classification obscures practice rather than illuminating it.

The persistence of track language creates analytical problems. It suggests progression, with informal dialogue feeding into formal negotiation. It implies complementarity, where each track reinforces the others. In practice, mediation efforts often intersect without sequence or reinforcement. Informal engagement may shape productive negotiation positions without resulting in formal talks. Formal negotiations may proceed without meaningful preparatory dialogue. Civilian actors may influence political debate without gaining access to high-level negotiating tables. Track logic struggles to account for these dynamics.

Track distinctions also shape expectations about legitimacy and relevance. Formal processes are often treated as the primary site of political decision-making, while informal initiatives are framed as supportive or preparatory. This hierarchy does not reflect how influence operates in fragmented environments. Political relevance depends less on formal status than on timing, access, and continuity. Some engagements matter because they endure. Others matter because they provide space for repositioning. These effects cut across track boundaries.

A related distortion appears in the continued emphasis on so-called Track 1.5 mediation. This category is often presented as the decisive space, where informal access meets formal authority.[13] Discreet engagement is assumed to translate directly into political decision-making. In practice, this expectation is overstated. Proximity to decision-makers does not guarantee influence over decisions, and informal access rarely produces linear effects at the formal level.

Backchannel engagement may keep communication open or clarify positions, but it does not reliably determine outcomes. Private mediation actors operating in this space, including well-established organisations, often sustain dialogue over long periods without generating clear political movement. Their relevance lies in continuity rather than leverage. Treating Track 1.5 as a privileged conduit into formal processes reinforces a myth of control that does not match how power operates in fragmented environments, where decisions emerge from shifting alignments rather than from discreet transmission between tracks.

The track model further assumes that mediation roles can be stabilised. Mediators are expected to operate within defined parameters, either as official facilitators

12 See, for instance, Joseph V. Montville, 'Track two diplomacy: The work of healing history', Whitehead J. Dipl. & Int'l Rel. 7 (2006): 15.

13 Nguyen und Mai, Track 1.5 Diplomacy in the US and Europe

or as informal conveners. Contemporary mediation practice rarely conforms to this expectation. Actors shift roles in response to political opportunity. Formal mandates coexist with informal channels. The same mediator may act publicly in one setting and privately in another. Track language cannot capture these shifts without stretching its own categories.

Moving beyond tracks does not mean abandoning analytical distinction. It requires different points of reference. An ecosystem perspective focuses on how initiatives relate to one another within a shared political space. It asks how engagement affects access, positioning, and agency. It examines whether dialogue sustains communication, constrains escalation, or preserves options for future negotiation. These questions cut across track boundaries and speak directly to political effect.

The continued reliance on track distinctions reflects institutional habit rather than analytical utility. The model offers order in settings where order is assumed. In fragmented mediation environments, it obscures more than it explains. Letting go of track logic is therefore a practical step towards understanding how mediation functions when authority, representation, and process no longer align.

Principles for Ecosystem-Based Mediation Practice

Working in a mediation ecosystem requires a different form of discipline from architecture-based approaches. The absence of a central process does not remove the need for standards. It shifts where those standards apply. The following principles are not presented as best practice or as a template. They reflect constraints that arise when mediation takes place in a crowded political field where alignment cannot be assumed and outcomes cannot be planned.

Political agency as the starting point

Mediation practice in fragmented environments needs to evolve from the political agency of participants. Dialogue that is organised around externally defined objectives or timelines tends to reproduce dependency rather than political capacity. Ecosystem-based mediation treats participants as political actors with distinct positions, constituencies, and constraints. The role of mediation is to provide space for articulation and contestation, not to steer actors towards pre-defined outcomes. Sometimes it makes more sense for actors not to compromise. Working with political realities requires restraint in agenda setting and clarity about whose interests the process serves.

Endurance over momentum

Short mediation cycles driven by urgency and turbulence rarely produce durable political effects in fragmented settings. Repeated attempts to accelerate agreement tend to exhaust participants and narrow options. Ecosystem-based mediation privileges endurance.[14] Processes are designed to remain available over time, even when immediate progress is limited. Continuity matters because it preserves relationships, maintains channels of communication, and allows positions to evolve without pressure to conclude prematurely. Success is measured in sustained engagement rather than visible breakthroughs.

14 de Waal et al., South Sudan: The Politics of Delay

Non-extractive engagement

Mediation becomes distortive when participation itself turns into a resource. Per diems, excessive travel, and serial workshops risk creating incentives that detach dialogue from political substance. Ecosystem-based mediation requires a clear boundary between facilitation and extraction. Engagement should not provide material or reputational rewards that incentivise attendance without commitment. The absence of such incentives sharpens focus and limits the risk of developing extractive mediation economies.

Selective access and trust-based formats

Open formats and broad inclusion do not automatically produce meaningful dialogue. In fragmented environments, selective formats can enable deeper political work. Trust-based settings allow participants to speak without performing for external audiences or constituencies. This does not imply exclusion as principle. It reflects a sequencing logic where political clarity precedes public positioning. Expansion of participation becomes a political decision taken by participants themselves rather than an external requirement.

Political seriousness in facilitation

Ecosystem-based mediation demands a high degree of political seriousness from facilitators. Facilitation that avoids disagreement or reframes political conflict into technical language undermines credibility. Participants assess mediation processes based on whether difficult issues are addressed directly and whether facilitators respect political disagreement as legitimate. This requires tolerance for ambiguity and a willingness to remain engaged when outcomes are uncertain.

Awareness of ecosystem effects

Every mediation initiative affects the wider environment in which it operates. Engagement can strengthen some actors while marginalising others. It can open space or close it. Ecosystem-based practice requires ongoing attention to these effects. Mediators must assess how their actions interact with other initiatives and how they alter political positioning beyond the immediate process. This awareness does not translate into coordination. It informs restraint and situational judgement.

Positioning the Sudan Dialogue Work and Lessons for Mediation Practice

The Sudan dialogue initiative on which this working paper is grounded relies on a simple premise: in a fragmented mediation environment, political engagement must be shaped by participants rather than by external process design. The initiative is participant-driven in its composition, agenda setting, and pacing. It brings together actors who are not aligned with the belligerents and who seek political engagement outside the pressure of formal mediation tracks. This is not an open platform but a dialogue process with a defined political purpose, shaped by the priorities and decisions of those involved.

The initiative operates with full awareness of the wider mediation environment. It does not position itself in opposition to other efforts, nor does it seek to replace them. Formal negotiations, ceasefire initiatives, humanitarian talks, and bilateral mediation efforts are treated as part of the political context in which the dialogue unfolds. They inform discussion and strategic reflection, but the dialogue does not feed

directly into them. This distance is deliberate. It preserves political autonomy and avoids premature alignment that would narrow options or instrumentalise participation. In a way, the dialogues are not feeding into something but preparing the ground for something. They aim not to be below, but to be ahead.

The dialogue is outcome-oriented. Its purpose is not exchange for its own sake, nor confidence-building detached from political substance. Participants engage to develop shared understandings and articulate political orientations that can shape future engagement when conditions allow. Outcomes are defined by participants themselves and evolve over time. This focus on outcome does not imply short timelines or immediate visibility. It reflects a commitment to political work that is durable and preparatory rather than reactive.

Situating this initiative within the mediation ecosystem requires restraint in how its role is described. It does not claim representational authority. It does not claim leverage over belligerents. Its contribution lies in sustaining political agency where most mediation efforts reduce agency by forcing alignment or demanding performative positions. In this sense, the dialogue does not aim to produce agreement. It aims to preserve the conditions under which political agreement remains possible.

This positioning responds to a broader problem visible across mediation efforts in Sudan and beyond: the centrality of legitimacy contests in negotiation processes. Ceasefire talks and political negotiations are routinely used by conflict parties to advance claims of legitimacy rather than to alter behaviour. Participation itself becomes a signal.[15] For the Sudanese Armed Forces, engagement in negotiations serves to reinforce claims of exclusive governmental authority. For the Rapid Support Forces and their allies, participation serves to assert political equivalence and international recognition. These dynamics shape incentives more than humanitarian considerations or military calculation.

In such a context, repeated calls to "stop the war now" or to agree on humanitarian ceasefires have lost political meaning. Such formulations attract universal assent because they are without consequence. They conceal the underlying legitimacy struggles that make implementation unattractive to the parties involved. Agreements framed around humanitarian access or temporary truces fail because they redistribute legitimacy in ways that parties resist. In Sudan, this dynamic was visible in the Jeddah process, where ceasefire agreements created political exposure without altering incentives for compliance.

Similar dynamics were evident in Syria, where humanitarian ceasefires became instruments of control rather than protection.[16] The lesson is not that humanitarian negotiations are futile. It is that they are politically charged and must be approached as such. Treating humanitarian ceasefires as neutral or technical measures obscures their political effects and increases the risk of backfire. Mediation practice that prioritises quick humanitarian wins without addressing legitimacy consequences risks entrenching conflict rather than mitigating it.

For mediation practice more broadly, the Sudan example suggests caution in three areas. First, engagement should not

15 Pospisil, From Paralysis to Pluralism

16 Kool et al., Managing the Humanitarian Micro-space

be equated with progress. Participation can serve strategic positioning without altering behaviour. Second, humanitarian framing does not depoliticise negotiation. It often intensifies legitimacy struggles. Third, restraint is a political choice. Declining to convene, to issue statements, or to push for agreement can preserve space that premature action would close.

These implications do not point towards a new mediation model. They point towards a shift in judgement. In fragmented environments, mediation practice must prioritise political clarity over visibility and durability over immediacy. Processes that sustain agency without forcing alignment may appear marginal. In practice, they often do more to preserve the possibility of settlement than initiatives that promise quick results but collapse under the weight of unresolved legitimacy contests.

Conclusion

Sudan exposes a form of mediation that no longer fits inherited categories. The persistence of multiple initiatives, the collapse of track hierarchies, and the strategic use of negotiations for legitimacy are features of a mediation environment shaped by regional competition and global political shifts. Attempts to restore coherence through designed alignment or lead-mediator authority misread this reality and risk further narrowing political space.

This working paper has argued for understanding mediation in such contexts as a multi-mediation environment rather than as a process that can be designed or owned. Individual initiatives operate within a mediation ecosystem whose dynamics cannot be planned, but whose effects can be shaped through disciplined practice. In this environment, legitimacy solely emerges from conduct, endurance, and political seriousness.

Calls for coordination deserve caution. Coordination is often invoked where political purpose is unclear. It frequently substitutes procedural alignment for substantive judgement and offers the appearance of control in settings where control no longer exists. In fragmented mediation environments, coordination without political clarity adds little and can obscure rather than improve understanding.

The implications might sound uncomfortable. Mediation cannot promise resolution or momentum under conditions of fragmentation. It can only preserve the conditions under which political settlement remains possible. This requires patience and the willingness to abandon the language of easy wins. Sudan does not call for more or less mediation. It calls for different approaches to mediation. The term multimediation and ecosystem thinking do offer a corrective to the engineering illusion that still dominates peace processes. Mediation is effective when it keeps politics alive.

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Abstract

Sudan highlights a form of mediation that no longer corresponds to inherited assumptions about peace processes. Since April 2023, the war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces has become fully regionalised and internationalised. Regional actors shape military and political dynamics while simultaneously engaging as mediators. In this environment, mediation operates as a political instrument within legitimacy struggles rather than as a neutral mechanism for conflict resolution. A dense landscape of parallel initiatives that coexist without converging into a single process has emerged.

Conventional mediation frameworks misinterpret this environment. Fragmentation is commonly treated as dysfunction and answered with calls for harmonised and linear attempts of peacemaking. In a context such as Sudan, however, fragmentation reflects the absence of a shared political horizon among external actors. It also reflects the strategic use of mediation itself. Attempts to impose coherence reduce political space and obscure how mediation functions under contemporary conditions. Track-based distinctions further distort analysis by relying on assumptions about orderly progression and controllable influence that do not apply in such settings.

Mediation and dialogue work in Sudan operate in a multimediation environment best understood as a mediation ecosystem. Within this ecosystem, legitimacy emerges through conduct and sustained effort rather than through formal mandates or official recognition. Effective practice prioritises participant-driven engagement, durability over speed, non-extractive formats, and careful attention to how individual initiatives affect the wider political environment. The Sudan dialogue initiative reflects this approach by sustaining political agency and outcome-oriented dialogue without forcing alignment. Mediation remains effective where it preserves political space and keeps political options open.

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