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Keeping Sudan in Focus: Policy Options for the Protection of Civilians

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Executive Summary

As Sudan enters its third year of war, civilians continue to bear the brunt of the conflict, facing widespread violence, forced displacement, famine, and a communications blackout. The warring parties—the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and their allied militias—have consistently violated international humanitarian law (IHL) and commitments under the Jeddah Declaration. Despite repeated calls from Sudanese civil society and the international community to protect civilians, concrete action remains limited.

This report examines policy options available to member states, multilateral institutions, and regional actors to advance the protection of civilians (POC) in Sudan. It highlights feasible measures that can be taken even as ceasefire negotiations remain elusive, including the following.

- **Navigating a Divided Security Council:** Security Council members, particularly the three African members, could pursue a new resolution on Sudan with backing from the African Union (AU); utilize informal mechanisms like Arria-formula meetings and subsidiary bodies of the council to build consensus; and organize a field visit to Sudan to engage stakeholders and elevate international attention.
- **Leveraging the Role of the General Assembly:** The General Assembly could continue to hold the Security Council accountable by convening debates following any future vetoes, support UN and AU fact-finding missions, and exercise normative power by adopting a resolution on civilian protection in Sudan.
- **Foresight and Planning by the UN Secretariat:** The UN Secretariat could undertake proactive scenario-based planning for the deployment of a future protection force or ceasefire monitoring mechanism, including by developing a comprehensive political strategy and implementation framework.
- **Joint Efforts with Regional Actors:** The AU should ensure it has a cohesive approach to the protection of civilians in Sudan by enhancing communication among African capitals and between Addis Ababa and New York. The UN and AU should also ensure their efforts are complementary, including by collaborating on their fact-finding missions and improving engagement between their genocide prevention offices.
- **Contact Group to Steer the Protection Agenda in Sudan:** A coalition of committed member states could establish a contact group on Sudan to develop a coherent political strategy, engage the warring parties and their backers with sustained diplomatic pressure, and create a dedicated mediation track for civilian protection.

Introduction

As the deadly conflict in Sudan enters its third year, civilians continue to shoulder the brunt of the harm. More than 30 million people—over half of the Sudanese population—are in need of humanitarian assistance, and 15 million have been uprooted from their homes. The main warring parties, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and their allied militias have continually violated their obligations to protect civilians under international humanitarian law (IHL), as well as the Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan that they signed in 2023.

In the face of this crisis, Sudanese civilians and civil society organizations have repeatedly called on the international community to support the protection of civilians (POC). The UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan also recommended the deployment of a protection force.¹ Yet despite these persistent appeals, it has been difficult to foster international consensus on concrete measures to mitigate civilian harm in Sudan. Member states have failed to follow through on the renewed commitment they made to uphold international humanitarian law and to protect all civilians in armed conflict in the Pact for the Future in September 2024.

There are several ways for member states to translate this commitment into meaningful action to protect civilians in Sudan. The secretary-general's last report on Sudan from October 2024 states that the “most effective way of ensuring the comprehensive and sustained protection of civilians in Sudan is for this devastating conflict to end and for the parties to heed the Security Council's call for an immediate cessation of hostilities.”² While efforts toward a ceasefire are critical, the protection of civilians cannot wait for the end of hostilities, and member states should not assume that civilian

protection will naturally follow a pause or end to the conflict. Once a ceasefire is agreed, there is no assurance that the parties involved will cease committing abuses against civilians or actively protect them. Any agreement should thus contain clear provisions for civilian protection, including robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to hold violators of the ceasefire and IHL accountable.

In addition to efforts to achieve a ceasefire, there is no shortage of viable options for better protecting civilians in Sudan. Various stakeholders have advanced numerous proposals, ranging from providing protection through humanitarian assistance, addressing famine and food insecurity, restoring critical infrastructure, and improving monitoring and reporting to deploying a security presence on the ground to establish safe zones and humanitarian corridors.³

The objective of this options paper is to highlight various avenues and entry points for member states and policymakers to advance the protection of civilians in Sudan in the short term while a ceasefire is still being worked on. These include actions that can be taken in collaboration with regional actors and organizations, as well as through concerted efforts by a coalition of willing states and through bilateral actions by member states and donors. An earlier version of this paper was presented to a group of experts and member states during a closed-door workshop on May 8, 2025, at the International Peace Institute, and some of the options presented emerged from the workshop.

Despite persistent appeals, it has been difficult to foster international consensus on concrete measures to mitigate civilian harm in Sudan.

Protection Threats in Sudan

Sudan is facing a devastating protection crisis, with nearly two-thirds of the population requiring protection or some form of humanitarian assistance.⁴ As the conflict shows no sign of abating, the diverse and context-specific protection needs—

1 UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan*, UN Doc. A/HRC/57/CRP.6, October 23, 2024.

2 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on Recommendations for the Protection of Civilians in the Sudan*, UN Doc. S/2024/759, October 21, 2024.

3 Amani Africa, “Prioritising Protection of Civilians in Peace and Security Diplomacy in Sudan: Challenges and Options,” November 18, 2024; Preventing and Ending Mass Atrocities (PAEMA), “Commitment to Protect: Recommendations for the Protection of Civilians in Sudan,” October 22, 2024.

4 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “Sudan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025,” January 23, 2025.

spanning different regions and population groups—demand a comprehensive approach, one that extends beyond physical safety to encompass broader concerns such as access to essential services, livelihoods, and psychosocial support.

Violence against Civilians

The war in Sudan that broke out in April 2023 has been marked by widespread violence and atrocities against civilians. This violence has been exacerbated by battlefield dynamics, with both the SAF and the RSF persistently targeting civilians as they fight to reclaim territories.

Whether through advances or retreats, battlefield outcomes have directly jeopardized civilian safety, with each major shift triggering deliberate reprisal attacks. In late 2024, for example, the RSF deliberately attacked civilians as they were about to lose control of Gezira state, and the SAF attacked civilians after capturing the state capital, Wad Madani.⁵ Reprisal attacks were also perpetrated by the SAF as they retook Khartoum and by the RSF as they retreated from Omdurman.

The SAF's recapture of Khartoum in March 2025 initially raised hopes for the beginning of the end of the war. However, the conflict simply again shifted westward to Darfur, while violence continued in Khartoum. The RSF has launched large-scale attacks on the famine-hit Zamzam and Abu Shouk camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), killing over 300 civilians and displacing the 400,000 people in the camps, forcing them to flee to El Fasher and Tawila, while many remain trapped in Zamzam camp. In June, the deadly assault on a humanitarian convoy delivering life-saving assistance to communities in El Fasher—resulting in the deaths of aid workers and the destruction of critical supplies—has further strained humanitarian operations.

RSF and allied militias have escalated violence in the Darfur and Kordofan regions, and the UN

secretary-general's special adviser on the prevention of genocide noted that they “continue to conduct ethnically motivated attacks against the Zaghawa, Masalit and Fur groups.”⁶ Areas such as North Kordofan are in imminent danger. As highlighted by the UN human rights chief, “The RSF has reportedly surrounded the city of El Obeid, currently held by the SAF and allied groups, and may attack it in the coming days.”⁷ The recent drone attacks by the RSF targeting Port Sudan are also a demonstration that no space in the country is safe for civilians.

Even in areas where active fighting has subsided, returnees face challenges. In areas recently recaptured by the SAF, returning displaced populations face significant uncertainties and risks. One of the most pressing challenges is the presence of unexploded ordnance, which poses a serious threat to civilian safety, not only in densely populated urban centers but also in rural areas, where it impedes agricultural activities. These hidden hazards endanger lives, restrict the movement of displaced communities, and disrupt critical services and livelihoods.⁸

Widespread sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), predominantly targeting women and girls, has been used as a weapon of war. Twelve million women and girls are at risk of SGBV across Sudan.⁹ Reports from humanitarian organizations and UN agencies paint a harrowing picture where sexual violence is not only pervasive but often systematic, leaving survivors with profound physical and psychological scars. In his address to the Human Rights Council, the African Union (AU) special envoy on the prevention of genocide noted that “sexual assault has reached such proportion that there have been reports of women committing mass suicide as the only way to avoid rape.”¹⁰

The crisis has also brought an alarming surge in grave violations against children. The secretary-general's report on children and armed conflict indicates that by the end of 2023 alone, Sudan

5 Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), “Defection and Violence against Civilians in Sudan's Al-Jazirah State,” November 18, 2024.

6 Virginia Gamba, “Statement at the 53rd Session of the Human Rights Council,” June 23, 2025.

7 Office of the UN Human Commissioner for Human Rights, “Sudan: Turk Warns of Catastrophic Surge in Violence,” June 20, 2025.

8 Khalid Abdelaziz and Eltayeb Siddig, “Families Find a New Danger in Sudan's Battered Capital, Unexploded Shells,” Reuters, May 19, 2025.

9 UN Population Fund, “UNFPA Sudan Emergency Situation Report No. 19,” April 30, 2025.

10 UN Human Rights Council, “Adama Dieng, African Union Special Envoy on the Prevention of Genocide, Speaks on Sudan,” YouTube, February 27, 2025.

witnessed a 480 percent increase in grave violations against children. It lists the SAF for killing and maiming children and attacking schools and hospitals, including with explosive weapons with wide-area effects. It also lists the RSF for recruiting and using, killing, and maiming children; perpetrating rape and other forms of sexual violence against children; and attacking schools and hospitals.¹¹

Beyond the immediate toll of physical violence, the war in Sudan is also inflicting irreversible harm on the country's cultural identity and the collective memory of communities. This includes the systematic looting of artifacts and archival collections and the destruction of historical and cultural landmarks—acts that erase centuries of Sudanese heritage. Museums and libraries in Khartoum, Omdurman, Nyala, and El Obeid—now encircled by the RSF—have been especially vulnerable, suffering damage, theft, and loss of irreplaceable collections. These attacks not only deprive communities of their cultural patrimony but also undermine the foundations of national identity, historical continuity, and intergenerational knowledge.¹²

Lack of Connectivity

The conflict and the actions of the warring parties, particularly since February 2024, have resulted in a nationwide communications blackout. Major Internet service providers—including Zain, MTN, and Sudani—have been forced to suspend operations. This has left large segments of the population cut off from vital information and essential services, including financial services such as e-cash.

The blackout is driven by a combination of political, technical, and financial factors. It is the result not only of damaged infrastructure but also of the widespread looting of generators essential for powering telecommunications networks. In many areas, the lack of a consistent fuel supply has also contributed to the collapse of connectivity. Some of

these challenges could be mitigated through the provision of fuel for existing generators and the deployment of solar-powered alternatives to support data centers. However, any technical intervention would require a political agreement with the warring parties to guarantee the safety and security of technical experts working to restore services.¹³ This could be challenging, as each warring side has actively sought to impose communications blackouts in areas controlled by their opponents, as well as in parts of territories they control to suppress dissent and hide human rights

violations.¹⁴ Alternative solutions such as Starlink have proven unreliable, with access available only intermittently. There is potential to explore the use of undersea cables to restore

connectivity, but this would necessitate engagement with the authorities in Port Sudan, adequate funding, and engaging mobile network operators.¹⁵

The UN Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC), which provides critical connectivity services to humanitarian actors, is currently operational at sixty-five sites across seven locations, primarily in the eastern part of the country, including Port Sudan, Kassala, Kosti, Damazine, El-Gedaref, Dongola, and Atbara. However, the ETC remains unable to access the Darfur and Kordofan regions. With only 4 percent of its budget currently funded, the ETC can sustain current operations only until September 2025 and lacks the resources needed to expand services.¹⁶

Given the telecommunications blackout, monitoring the situation on the ground has become increasingly difficult for humanitarian agencies and the international community. Sudanese civil society actors and local responders have therefore played a leading role in documenting violations of IHL, human rights abuses, and civilian casualties. Despite the vast scale and complexity of the conflict's impact on

Given the telecommunications blackout, monitoring the situation on the ground has become increasingly difficult.

11 UN General Assembly and Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict*, UN Doc. A/78/842-S/2024/384, June 3, 2024.

12 Heritage for Peace, "Sudan Heritage Protection Initiative (SHPI)," available at <https://www.heritageforpeace.org/sudan-heritage-protection-initiative-shpi/>.

13 Reflections from participants, "Policy Options for the Protection of Civilians in Sudan," IPI workshop, May 8, 2025.

14 Marcin Frąckiewicz, "Internet Access in Sudan," TS2 Space, February 25, 2025.

15 Reflections from participants, "Policy Options for the Protection of Civilians in Sudan," May 8, 2025.

16 Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC), "Sudan, Conflict: ETC Situation Report Number 29," May 2025.

civilians and local responders, a robust international monitoring and reporting system—one that closely collaborates with and supports local initiatives—currently remains out of reach. With traditional information channels disrupted and no international monitoring mechanism operating on the ground, satellite imagery has become a vital “eye in the sky” to monitor events, track population movements, and document attacks on civilian infrastructure and other violations.¹⁷

Flow of Arms

The influx of weapons into the hands of both the SAF and the RSF as well as their allied forces has intensified the scale and lethality of the violence and exacerbated threats to the protection of civilians. Advanced weaponry and sustained ammunition supplies have allowed both sides to carry out prolonged military campaigns in densely populated areas. The warring parties have used imported weapons to carry out indiscriminate attacks on residential areas, IDP camps, hospitals, markets, and humanitarian convoys.

The UN Panel of Experts on Sudan has documented arms transfers that violate the existing Security Council arms embargo on Darfur, highlighting the involvement of foreign states and transnational networks in sustaining the conflict. In its 2024 report, the panel specifically acknowledged the support provided by the United Arab Emirates to the RSF.¹⁸ However, despite growing evidence of continued external backing, the panel’s 2025 report was notably more restrained in drawing similar conclusions.¹⁹ Moreover, the absence of a nationwide arms embargo significantly hampers efforts to capture the full scope of actors supplying weapons to both sides.

Humanitarian Access and Financial Shortfalls

Sudan is facing an extreme humanitarian crisis, with half of the population acutely food insecure, while over 600,000 people face catastrophic levels of hunger—more than in any other country.²⁰ Humanitarian action is significantly curtailed due to violence and bureaucratic impediments by the warring parties. The only border crossings that remain accessible for humanitarian aid are Adre and Tine with Chad and Renk with South Sudan.²¹

Humanitarian access has been especially restricted in Darfur. International NGOs and local responders remain the primary actors operating in the region. The UN’s presence is significantly limited due to its deferential approach to engaging with officially recognized governments, which is the SAF in the Sudan context. While the UN currently accesses Darfur through periodic extended visits, it lacks a sustained humanitarian presence, which is a major gap given the scale and intensity of the humanitarian needs.²²

In addition to these barriers to humanitarian access, humanitarian funding is inadequate to meet the growing needs, which is severely straining both local and international responders. The 2025 humanitarian response plan for Sudan, which included an appeal for \$4.16 billion, is only 12 percent funded. General protection is 13 percent funded, while child protection is only 3 percent funded, work on gender-based violence is only 4 percent funded, and mine action is almost entirely unfunded.²³

With the decline in humanitarian funding, locally driven and adaptive mechanisms will be crucial to addressing the growing needs of vulnerable popula-

17 Amgad Fareid Eltayeb, “Time of Action: Envisioning a New Approach to Protect Civilians in Sudan,” European Council on Foreign Relations, September 23, 2024.

18 UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 15 January 2024 from the Panel of Experts on the Sudan Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2024/759, January 15, 2024.

19 UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 14 April 2025 from the President of the Security Council Acting in the Absence of a Chair of the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1591 (2005) Concerning the Sudan Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2024/239, April 17, 2025.

20 World Food Program, “Emergency: Sudan,” available at <https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/sudan-emergency>.

21 UN OCHA, “Sudan Humanitarian Access Snapshot,” April 2025.

22 Maria Luisa Gambale, “In Darfur, MSF Gets Creative Amid Massive US Aid Cuts and UN’s Remote Presence,” PassBlue, April 23, 2025.

23 UN OCHA, “Sudan Humanitarian Response Dashboard,” available at <https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1220/article/sudan-humanitarian-response-dashboard-2025>.

tions in Sudan. Humanitarian actors will need to explore strategies for both mobilizing and distributing resources more effectively. Humanitarian organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières and the Norwegian Refugee Council have been directing support to Sudanese mutual aid groups and local organizations. Likewise, the Sudan Humanitarian Fund managed by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) provides flexible funding directly to local responders. These local responders continue to deliver critical protection and humanitarian assistance, demonstrating remarkable coordination, resilience, and adaptability amid a dire humanitarian crisis and despite being targeted by the warring parties.

Multilateral and Ad Hoc Policy Avenues to Advance the Protection of Civilians in Sudan

Advancing mechanisms for the protection of civilians in Sudan will require tailored diplomatic engagement across various capitals, particularly within the region, as well as the concerted efforts of humanitarian actors on the ground. The options below represent the most feasible courses of action at this time and therefore do not include all proposals by Sudanese civil society actors and the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan, such as the deployment of a protection force, though such measures should remain under consideration in the longer term. The focus is also on steps that member states can take, particularly at UN headquarters and in partnership with regional actors such as the AU, rather than on operational responses within Sudan.

A wide range of protection options has been proposed by experts and civil society actors, requiring careful reflection on the most effective policy mechanisms and channels for action.²⁴ It is essential to evaluate how existing multilateral frameworks can be leveraged—or whether new and innovative approaches are needed—to inject fresh momentum and perspective into the protection

agenda in Sudan's current context. The options outlined below may not bring an immediate end to the threats facing civilians but can help mitigate these threats by making the international system more responsive.

With the adoption of the Pact for the Future, member states made a clear commitment to “protect all civilians in armed conflict” and “ensure that people affected by humanitarian emergencies receive the support they need.” These commitments should form the basis for improving responses to contemporary protection crises. The pact articulates various areas of commitment, including advancing the children and armed conflict agenda; restricting the use of explosive weapons in populated areas; enabling safe, rapid, and unimpeded humanitarian access and assistance; protecting humanitarian and UN personnel; respecting and protecting journalists, media professionals, and associated personnel working in situations of armed conflict; and redoubling efforts to end impunity and ensure accountability for violations of IHL. This renewed commitment by UN member states must be realized through diverse channels, actors, and mechanisms to more effectively mobilize international efforts to respond to situations such as the war in Sudan.

Navigating a Divided Security Council

As the primary mandate holder in the maintenance of international peace and security, the UN Security Council is expected to play a critical role in advancing the protection of civilians. For over twenty-five years, the council has addressed a broad spectrum of protection issues, adopting numerous resolutions and developing normative frameworks. Yet the gap between norms and the harsh realities faced by civilians in conflict-affected areas around the world is widening.²⁵ The adoption of various thematic resolutions on the protection of civilians over the years has not effectively translated into tangible protection solutions for contexts such as Sudan. Security Council members could consider several avenues toward more robust action on POC in Sudan.

²⁴ Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, “Recommendations from Sudanese Women Leaders,” May 19, 2025.

²⁵ UN OCHA, “Policy Brief on the Security Council’s Consideration of the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 2019–2023,” February 18, 2024.

Passing a resolution on Sudan: In response to the crises in Ukraine, Palestine, and Syria, multiple efforts have been made to table resolutions at the Security Council, even in cases where a veto was highly likely. In the case of Sudan, however, there has been only one attempt to pass a resolution in the Security Council: recommending the establishment of a monitoring mechanism, which Russia vetoed in November 2024.²⁶ A renewed negotiation process would benefit from a more unified stance among the council's three African members (A3), potentially through a resolution led by the A3+1 (the A3 and the council member from the Caribbean) outlining concrete options for civilian protection. One A3+1 member state (Sierra Leone) was a co-penholder with the UK on the failed resolution in November 2024, while the other members of the A3+1, alongside every other member state except Russia, voted in support of the resolution. A signal from the AU on the need to reengage on this process could help the A3+1 find an entry point and provide political backing for the bloc to initiate a new resolution.

Beyond formal negotiation processes, member states can use more informal mechanisms to advance the protection of civilians agenda during their Security Council presidencies.

Using informal mechanisms to advance POC: Beyond formal negotiation processes, member states can use more informal mechanisms to advance the protection of civilians agenda during their council presidencies. They could propose thematic agenda items or hold consultations through an Arria-formula meeting or informal interactive dialogue. They could also use the Informal Expert Group on POC and subsidiary bodies of the council such as the Ad Hoc Working Group on Conflict Prevention and Resolution in Africa and the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. Compared to formal council sessions, these informal formats could offer valuable opportunities for more interactive dialogue to map and elaborate concrete actions,

build consensus, and keep the POC agenda a priority. They could even potentially prepare the groundwork for formal negotiations.

Organizing a field visit to Sudan: Council members could also consider organizing a visit to Sudan to engage directly with stakeholders, hear first-hand from affected communities, assess the humanitarian situation on the ground, and elevate international attention to the crisis. In the past, field visits have been used to maintain the council's attention to certain contexts and have helped to build consensus. For instance, the council's visit to Bangladesh and Myanmar in May 2018 helped to foster alignment in council members' messaging on the humanitarian situation of the Rohingya refugees.²⁷ Following the field visit to the Lake Chad Basin in March 2017, the council adopted its first resolution on Boko Haram's threat to the protection of civilians.²⁸

Renewing efforts to rein in the veto: To avoid further erosion of the council's ability

to effectively respond to atrocities, member states should also bring renewed attention to past efforts to limit the use of the veto. One such effort is the work of the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency (ACT) Group. The ACT Code of Conduct, which has been signed by more than 120 member states, calls upon members of the Security Council to take decisive action in situations involving genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes and to refrain from voting against credible measures intended to prevent or halt such atrocities.²⁹ Additionally, renewed attention should be given to the 2015 Political Declaration on Suspension of Veto Powers in Cases of Mass Atrocity, which has been signed by more than 100 member states.³⁰ This initiative urges the permanent members of the Security Council to voluntarily suspend their veto rights when confronted with situations of mass atrocity.

26 In June 2024, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2736, which demanded the RSF end its siege of El Fasher, and in March 2024, it adopted Resolution 2724, which called for the cessation of hostilities during the holy month of Ramadan.

27 Security Council Report, "Dispatches from the Field: Rakhine State, Myanmar," May 2, 2018.

28 United Nations, "Security Council Strongly Condemns Terrorist Attacks, Other Violations in Lake Chad Basin Region, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2349 (2017)," press release, UN Doc. SC/12773, March 31, 2017.

29 ACT Alliance, "ACT Code of Conduct 2024," available at <https://actalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/ACT-Code-of-Conduct-revised-2024.pdf>; Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (GCR2P), "List of Signatories to the ACT Code of Conduct," June 8, 2022, available at <https://www.globalr2p.org/resources/list-of-signatories-to-the-act-code-of-conduct/>.

30 GCR2P, "Political Declaration on Suspension of Veto Powers in Cases of Mass Atrocities," August 1, 2015.

Leveraging the Role of the General Assembly

Throughout its history, the General Assembly has played a role in contexts where the Security Council is unable to fulfill its mandate to maintain international peace and security. With the veto power paralyzing Security Council action on Sudan and the warring parties' continuous disregard for IHL, the General Assembly can support the protection of civilians through four broad approaches.

Continuing to hold the Security Council accountable:

General Assembly Resolution 76/262, the so-called "veto initiative," stipulates that every time a veto is used in the Security Council, the General Assembly will meet within ten working days and "hold a debate on the situation as to which the veto was cast, provided that the Assembly does not meet in an emergency special session on the same situation."³¹ In line with this resolution, the General Assembly convened an open debate after Russia vetoed the draft resolution on Sudan co-penned by the UK and Sierra Leone in 2024. The briefing brought together a cross-regional group of member states to call for more action to protect civilians in Sudan. The General Assembly can play a similar role if any future Security Council resolutions on Sudan are vetoed.

The situation in Sudan is no less urgent than other conflict situations where the General Assembly has played a proactive role and warrants the same level of recognition and engagement.

Supporting investigations: In the past, the General Assembly has established investigatory and fact-finding bodies or passed resolutions contributing to the creation of fact-finding missions by other bodies, including the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Myanmar established by the Human Rights Council. The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan was also established by the Human Rights Council and mandated to submit its report to the General Assembly as well.

Mandating a peace operation: Although the General Assembly has not exercised this authority

in the past two decades, it has historically authorized and deployed peace operations under Chapter VI of the UN Charter, demonstrating its capacity to take concrete action in matters of international peace and security. General Assembly-mandated operations have undertaken a wide range of functions, including monitoring human rights, verifying compliance with peace agreements, and maintaining ceasefires.³²

Exercising its normative power by passing a resolution:

While General Assembly resolutions do not carry the same binding authority as Security Council decisions, they can play a significant role in advancing peace and security efforts. In recent years, the General Assembly has adopted resolutions in major conflicts and crises including in Syria, Gaza, Myanmar, and Ukraine, in all cases due to deadlock in the Security Council (see Box 1). The General Assembly has used these resolutions to call for ceasefires, the protection of minorities, and the establishment of mechanisms for

protection.

Despite the severity of the crisis, the humanitarian catastrophe, and the far-reaching regional implications, there has not been a single General Assembly resolution on Sudan since the outbreak of the war in April 2023. For the past twenty-five months, amid ongoing and repeated violence against civilians in Sudan, the General Assembly's engagement has remained limited despite the Security Council's struggles to take decisive action to ensure civilian protection. The situation in Sudan is no less urgent than other conflict situations where the General Assembly has played a proactive role and warrants the same level of recognition and engagement.

By adopting a resolution on the protection of civilians in Sudan, the General Assembly could demonstrate international consensus, exert political pressure, and help galvanize collective action to safeguard civilians. There is potential for generating cross-regional support for language in

³¹ UN General Assembly Resolution 76/262 (April 26, 2022), UN Doc. A/RES/76/262.

³² Recommendations based on: Erica Gaston and Adam Day, "Assembly for Peace: A Digital Handbook on the UN General Assembly's Past Practice on Peace and Security," United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR), August 30, 2024.

Box 1. General Assembly resolutions on recent and current crises and conflict situations

Myanmar: General Assembly Resolution 75/287 was adopted in June 2021, four months after the overthrow of the government by a military junta. It condemned the violence by armed forces against protesters and called on member states to prevent the flow of arms into Myanmar. It spurred the Security Council to adopt Resolution 2669 on Myanmar in 2022. About eight annual resolutions on the situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar have been adopted since December 2017.³³

Gaza: General Assembly Resolution ES-10/21 was adopted twenty days after the October 7th attacks after the Security Council failed to adopt a resolution. It called for an immediate ceasefire, the release of Israeli hostages, and humanitarian access. Subsequently, the General Assembly has adopted three resolutions demanding a ceasefire and the protection of civilians.

Ukraine: The General Assembly has adopted about six resolutions on Ukraine since Resolution ES-11/1, adopted in March 2022, days after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which called for de-escalation and the withdrawal of Russian forces and reaffirmed Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Syria: The General Assembly adopted Resolution 77/301 in June 2023, establishing an Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic. It adopted Resolution 71/248 in December 2016, establishing the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the investigation and prosecution of those responsible for the most serious crimes under international law committed in Syria since March 2011. Since the popular uprising in 2011 and the violent repression that followed, the General Assembly has adopted close to twenty resolutions on Syria.

several areas, including the following:

- **Recognizing and advocating for the protection of mutual aid groups** such as community kitchens and emergency response rooms, including by acknowledging their vital contributions, calling for enhanced measures to ensure their safety and protection, and underscoring their need for increased political, financial, and operational support.
- **Calling for an end to the telecommunications blackout**, including by encouraging member states—both individually and collectively—to leverage their diplomatic influence to advocate for the immediate restoration of telecommunications services in all their engagements with the warring parties.
- **Calling for the protection of specific groups**, particularly non-Arab communities in Darfur, survivors of SGBV, women, children, and IDPs.
- **Calling for stricter enforcement of the Security Council arms embargo and advocating for its extension beyond Darfur**, acknowledging the expanded, nationwide nature of the current conflict, which differs markedly from the conditions under which the embargo was originally established.
- **Recognizing the critical role of the Human Rights Council's Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan** and advocating for the systematic monitoring and implementation of its recommendations to strengthen accountability for human rights violations.
- **Calling for the protection and restoration of Sudan's rich cultural heritage** to highlight the loss of and damage to historical sites and artifacts and the profound impact this has on community identity and sense of belonging.

Foresight and Planning by the UN Secretariat

Even if the immediate deployment of a protection force remains operationally and politically unfeasible, this should not prevent the UN Secretariat from preparing for the possibility of deploying such a mission or another form of deployment, such as a

³³ Since 1991, the General Assembly has also adopted a resolution on the overall human rights situation in Myanmar.

ceasefire monitoring mechanism, in the future. The Secretariat could undertake proactive scenario-based planning and craft a comprehensive political strategy to guide options for such a deployment in consultation with key stakeholders, including Sudanese political actors, humanitarian organizations, and regional partners. The Secretariat could also develop a framework for such a mechanism's tasks and objectives, including those related to protection, as well as potential verification frameworks, compliance mechanisms, and confidence-building measures. Additionally, it could identify potential challenges and risks, such as security threats, logistical hurdles, or resource limitations. Such preparations would position the UN to swiftly operationalize a ceasefire monitoring and implementation mechanism should the warring parties eventually agree to a cessation of hostilities.

While the Secretariat has increasingly linked its planning efforts to Security Council decisions and formal mandates, such initiatives should not be contingent on council authorization.³⁴ Nonetheless, given the constraints in its current planning culture, political backing from a coalition of member states could incentivize the Secretariat to adopt a more proactive approach. A planning exercise would also benefit from cross-departmental collaboration—bringing together the expertise of the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), which currently leads on Sudan, and the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), including its POC team, to assess a range of potential options for civilian protection.

Joint Efforts with Regional Actors

The current protection crisis in Sudan requires the concerted efforts of both the UN and regional actors, particularly the AU. Building on the UN and the AU's existing norms on POC and consulta-

tions on POC within the UN Security Council and the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC), there is potential for more complementarity between the two organizations. African member states have a critical role to play in bridging regional and global efforts. The AU PSC has adopted various decisions calling for investigation into violence and atrocities and the development of a comprehensive plan for the protection of civilians in Sudan. Additionally, the AU PSC has tasked its Sub-Committee on Sanctions with identifying external actors providing military, financial, and political support to the warring parties in Sudan and with recommending strategies to curtail such interference.³⁵ While these decisions have not yet been implemented, they can serve as a reference point for African states in their engagement in global processes.

Even if the immediate deployment of a protection force remains operationally and politically unfeasible, this should not prevent the UN Secretariat from preparing for the possibility of deploying such a mission.

To ensure the AU's efforts are coherent, there is a need to establish clearer and more consistent channels of communication not only among national capitals in Africa but also between the AU and African permanent

missions at the UN. In addressing a crisis as complex as Sudan's, it is essential to engage the broader African Group—beyond the three African members serving on the Security Council—to ensure a more cohesive regional voice. Moreover, African member states should approach their international engagement on Sudan not only through the lens of their national interests but also in light of the principles and commitments in the AU's Constitutive Act, which shifted regional cooperation from a doctrine of noninterference to one of non-indifference.

One opportunity for joint efforts between the UN and the AU is the investigations both organizations are undertaking. The Joint Fact-Finding Mission led by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights established in August 2024 could further collaborate with the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan established in

34 Jenna Russo and Bitania Tadesse, "Scenario-Based Planning and the Future of Peace Operations," International Peace Institute, March 2025.

35 AU Peace and Security Council 1213rd Meeting (May 21, 2024), AU Doc. PSC/PR/BR.1213 (2024); AU Peace and Security Council 1218th Meeting (June 21, 2024), AU Doc. PSC/HoSG/COMM.1218 (2024).

October 2023. As noted in a recent press conference by the chair of the UN independent fact-finding mission, both fact-finding missions are already exchanging best practices.³⁶ This collaboration could be enhanced to also include, where feasible, joint field visits to conflict-affected areas in Sudan and joint statements, reports, and recommendations to the AU, UN bodies, and international partners. This joint approach could also improve both missions' engagement with relevant stakeholders and ensure recommendations are aligned with broader regional peace and security objectives. Such cooperation would strengthen the effectiveness of both investigations, improve the accuracy and comprehensiveness of their findings, and ultimately contribute to a more robust response to human rights violations.

Another area for cooperation between the AU and UN is joint efforts around atrocity prevention. There is a need for more systematic engagement between the Office of the AU Special Envoy on the Prevention of Genocide and the Office of the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide. Such collaboration would help bridge gaps between regional and international mechanisms and enable joint advocacy for preventive action, ultimately contributing to the more effective protection of civilians and prevention of mass atrocities. However, both offices are hamstrung by the broader politicization of norms around atrocity prevention. The UN office has been undermined by powerful states and is not meaningfully integrated into UN decision-making processes for atrocity prevention.³⁷ The AU office is new, and the special envoy was only appointed in April 2024. Despite the special envoy's extensive expertise and mandate from the AU PSC, he has previously been advised against making public statements, which has

A contact group—a committed group of member states, ideally with the support of a multilateral institution—could help to develop a coherent political strategy for driving forward protection measures.

limited his actions, particularly his public-facing engagements.³⁸ However, in a meeting with the UN Human Rights Council, he expressed his readiness to work with the UN fact-finding mission and AU investigation mechanisms.³⁹ More recently, he called on member states to support the work of both mechanisms to end cycles of impunity.⁴⁰ Despite the political and institutional challenges, having dedicated offices on atrocity prevention is critical for multilateral organizations when responding to contexts like Sudan where atrocities have been systematic and pervasive.

Contact Group to Steer the Protection Agenda in Sudan

When formal multilateral bodies are unable to reach consensus, a coalition of member states can provide valuable platforms for building agreement and advancing protection efforts. Such groups can

allow for more flexible, innovative approaches and can help to maintain momentum on urgent issues, even when official channels are deadlocked. When multiple member states come together, each with distinct strengths and leverage, their

combined efforts can place greater diplomatic and political pressure on the warring parties and increase the credibility and weight of their demands. Acting through a coalition also allows individual countries to avoid bearing the full diplomatic risk alone, especially when they are worried about jeopardizing their bilateral relationships with the Sudanese authorities.⁴¹

Sudanese civil society actors have consistently called for the establishment of a contact group to provide a dedicated diplomatic track focused on advancing the protection of civilians in Sudan.⁴² While there is no shortage of potential policy

36 United Nations, "Press Conference: Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan," press conference, June 17, 2025.

37 Douglas Irvin-Erikson and Ernesto Verdeja, "An Assessment of the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect," Stimson Center, December 3, 2024.

38 Amani Africa, "Prioritising Protection of Civilians," p. 9.

39 UN Human Rights Council, "Adama Dieng."

40 Adama Dieng, "Sudan's Implosion Must Be Stopped Now," *The EastAfrican*, June 25, 2025.

41 Teresa Whitfield, "Minilateral Mechanisms for Peacemaking in a Multipolar World: Friends, Contact Groups, Troikas, Quads, and Quints," International Peace Institute, May 2025.

42 Sudan INGO Forum, "Sudan Left in Free Fall as Conference Delivers Tepid Words, and Not Commitments," April 16, 2025.

options, one of the key obstacles has been the absence of a “vehicle” to carry these forward in a systematic and sustained manner.⁴³ A contact group—a committed group of member states, ideally with the support of a multilateral institution—could help to develop a coherent political strategy for driving forward protection measures.⁴⁴ This group could engage all the warring parties and their backers and pressure them to take action on the protection of civilians. The creation of such a contact group to facilitate ceasefire talks was one of the main goals of the recent London Conference, but this effort was unsuccessful due to divisions among regional powers.

The proliferation of mediation tracks and the fragmentation of international efforts have hindered the development of a unified and effective approach to the protection of civilians in Sudan. A separate diplomatic track for the protection of civilians presents an opportunity to advance measures independently of a comprehensive ceasefire agreement. Although the Jeddah Declaration is the only framework both parties have agreed on, it has lost traction, lacking any enforcement or accountability mechanisms. In a recent briefing to the Security Council, Médecins Sans Frontières highlighted how the declaration is often “invoked to signal concern while absolving those with responsibility and influence from taking real action.” A contact group could help steer the warring parties toward a more robust commitment

to the protection of civilians.

Conclusion

Despite its devastating impact, the war in Sudan continues to garner minimal international attention and is overshadowed by other global crises. As the multilateral system faces mounting pressures and competing priorities, there is a real risk that the crisis in Sudan will slip further down the global agenda. This makes it even more urgent to mount a deliberate and sustained effort to keep Sudan in focus. If member states and multilateral institutions are sincere in their expressions of concern over the lack of attention, then they should translate their words into decisive action that must be anchored in alleviating civilian suffering and holding perpetrators and their backers accountable.

The multilayered attacks against civilians, particularly in regions such as Darfur, underscore the urgent need for coordinated, principled, and sustained international engagement. Inaction in the face of such suffering is increasingly eroding global norms and risks normalizing impunity for mass atrocities. Advancing the protection of civilians in Sudan is integral to preventing further regional destabilization and restoring prospects for a just and inclusive peace. Without safeguarding civilians, any political or peace process will remain inadequate and incomplete.

43 Reflections from participants, “Policy Options for the Protection of Civilians in Sudan,” May 8, 2025.

44 Whitfield, “Minilateral Mechanisms.”

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