

Can Washington Succeed in Taking the Lead on Sudan's Crisis?



On August 11, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of Sudan's Sovereign Council and commander of the army, departed the coastal city of Port Sudan on an unannounced visit to Switzerland to meet with Mossad Boules, senior advisor to the U.S. president for African affairs.

The meeting—held in Zurich and representing the highest-level contact between the two countries since the October 25, 2021 coup carried out by the army and Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—focused on ending the conflict, facilitating humanitarian aid, combating terrorism, and the prospect of direct negotiations with the UAE.

U.S.-Sudan relations had improved significantly after the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019. Washington supported Sudan's civilian-led transitional government by removing the country from its list of state sponsors of terrorism, upgrading diplomatic relations, and more. However, ties soured following the coup, which the U.S. condemned as a power grab.

Since then, the U.S. has not actively pursued a Sudan strategy independently, nor has it engaged in high-level talks, including the negotiations held in Jeddah between the Sudanese army and the RSF—talks that were co-mediated by Saudi Arabia.

That mediation process was suspended in late 2023 after both parties failed to

implement confidence-building measures, such as withdrawing troops from cities and detaining key figures from the former regime.

Ongoing Deadlock

In August 2024, the U.S. attempted to convene talks in Geneva between the army and RSF. However, the army refused to participate unless the RSF first implemented provisions of the Jeddah Declaration. A government delegation was sent, but no negotiations took place.

At the time, the UN, African Union, Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the U.S., UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Switzerland all deliberated on the crisis. This led to the formation of the “United” coalition, tasked with ending the war, establishing peace, protecting civilians, and ensuring the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Despite these efforts, U.S. Special Envoy for Sudan Tom Perriello's visits to Arab and African nations, as well as to Sudan itself, failed to make meaningful progress in bringing the warring parties back to the table. The same applied to the “United” coalition.

Perriello, who took the role after U.S. Ambassador John Godfrey's resignation following Donald Trump's return to power, left the position, leaving a vacuum. The Biden administration sought to fill it through the “Quad” group (U.S., Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt), which had planned a meeting for July 29. That meeting was postponed due to disagreements over the final communiqué.

Multiple attempts to resolve the conflict through regional engagement—including a UK-led initiative to establish an international contact group during a London conference marking two years since the war began—have also failed.

Throughout this period, the U.S. has preferred to involve others rather than lead efforts to pressure Sudan's army and the RSF back into talks. The recent meeting between Burhan and Boules marks a notable shift, suggesting Washington may now be ready to act alone.

Why the Shift Now?

The U.S. Congress had already moved to designate the RSF as a terrorist organization, aiming to prevent any country—including the UAE—from supplying it with arms. The Burhan-Boules meeting may represent the start of a new phase in which Washington takes control of the Sudan file, amid conflicting regional interests.

As part of its new approach, Washington has offered the Sudanese army a strong incentive: renewed cooperation on counterterrorism and direct bilateral relations, in support of its conflict-resolution plan.

Political analyst Tayseer Awadullah wrote on Facebook that the counterterrorism cooperation proposal is likely the result of a thorough U.S. assessment of Sudan's institutional capacity to participate meaningfully. She noted that such cooperation could yield intelligence, security, and military benefits for Sudan, including joint training programs, political reforms, and reintegration into the global financial system.

The Sudanese army's refusal to grant Russia or Iran military bases on the Red Sea coast—despite repeated requests in exchange for military support—positions it favorably in the eyes of the U.S., which may now be willing to sideline regional partners to secure its interests in Sudan as the conflict drags on.

Dr. Musab Mohamed Ali, professor of political science at Nilein University, observes that the U.S. changed its approach after the political and military stalemate that followed failed negotiations in Jeddah and Geneva. Speaking to Noon Post, he noted that Washington now appears determined to achieve a breakthrough.

“The Burhan-Boules meeting signals U.S. intent to ally with Sudan on counterterrorism, which effectively means supporting the army and building a partnership with it—unlike other countries that oppose the army and RSF sharing power in the post-war period,” he said.

He added, “This meeting could be the beginning of a resolution, especially after the Quad's collapse. Washington is trying to take the lead by prioritizing a ceasefire and humanitarian aid. Its counterterrorism offer can be seen as a strategic incentive to push the army toward flexibility on political matters.”

Dr. Musab also highlighted the emerging U.S.-Turkey alignment on the Red Sea, noting Ankara's offer to develop Port Sudan as part of a broader regional influence agenda, which aligns with Washington's counterterrorism goals.

Is Washington Trying to Go It Alone in Sudan?

The U.S. Congress's move to label the RSF a terrorist group makes cooperation with it legally and politically untenable. Widespread public outrage over the RSF's atrocities further justifies Washington's support for Burhan's request to exclude the group from post-war political arrangements.

Washington's renewed interest in Sudan may also reflect a desire to reassert its influence in Africa, particularly as Russian presence wanes. Sudan represents a strategic gateway to the Horn of Africa and East Africa. A U.S.-led solution would likely center on backing the army as the backbone of the state while eventually pressuring for a broader civilian authority.

Egypt is unlikely to object, as it supports continued army control. Saudi Arabia

also favors stability in eastern Sudan to ensure the security of the Red Sea. While the UAE may obstruct any settlement, it lacks the tools to do much beyond sowing chaos.

The real challenge lies within Sudan itself. The war has caused massive destruction, a deep humanitarian crisis, and the proliferation of armed groups. Political factions are fractured, and ethnic polarization is rampant.

Nonetheless, the army—seeking to move the seat of power from Port Sudan back to Khartoum by October—may regain control, especially given the external support it has received during the conflict.

The Sudanese army is known for avoiding decisive battles, preferring to ensure stability and secure supply lines before retaking RSF-held areas in Kordofan and Darfur. This caution may also help it strike deals that allow it to stay in power longer.

For now, the U.S. is unlikely to press for a civilian transition, focusing instead on securing a ceasefire and addressing humanitarian needs. A direct dialogue between Khartoum and Abu Dhabi—brokered by Washington—could potentially end Emirati support for the RSF, which may collapse if its supply lines are severed.

In the end, the Burhan-Boules meeting reflects a significant shift in U.S. policy toward Sudan, with Washington appearing intent on leading the peace process alone. Previous multilateral approaches have only deepened the crisis. Whether this new course succeeds will depend on Washington's ability to balance internal and external interests.

One final possibility—though difficult to implement—cannot be ruled out: that Washington might tacitly back the RSF's unspoken aim of separating Darfur and parts of Kordofan from Sudan should it capture El Fasher, the last major urban stronghold under army control. This, paradoxically, could pave the way toward restoring stability in the rest of Sudan.