Risks of Peace in Post-War Yemen Series
When Peace Produces War: The Case of South Sudan

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Special Report

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Abstract

Rather than preventing conflict, internationally backed peace agreements in South Sudan, Sudan, and elsewhere have established a system of incentives that structure elite compacts in the capital that actually intensify the political economy of war. Such peace agreements rely on a normative vision of the state that is at odds with how states have actually come to function in many conflict zones in the world since the 1980s. This normative vision enables peace agreements to be easily instrumentalized by elites and is a major reason why such agreements fail to prevent conflict. Such failures are not contingent but are structural properties of peace agreements that at best aim for regional stability rather than building sustainable and enduring peace.

When Peace Produces War

In 2018, after five years of ruinous civil war, the main belligerent parties in South Sudan signed a peace agreement that was supposed to bring conflict in the country to an end.[1] Yet between 2018–21, the levels of violence experienced in much of the country actually increased.[2] Indeed, far from closing the book on hostilities in South Sudan, the peace agreement has been accompanied by new forms of warfare. This report will explore how the violence currently scarring the country is not occurring *despite* the peace agreement, but *because of it*.[3] Moreover, in shedding light on how such agreements can actually produce violence, this report will reflect more broadly on the limitations of internationally-brokered peace agreements.

As the name suggests, *peace* agreements are generally not thought of as producing war. Instead, the general expectation is that such agreements will bring about an end to hostilities. Paradoxically, however, the history of internationally backed peace agreements over the last twenty years tends to suggest something else, which is that such agreements instead produce a particular modulation of war.[4] This is because peace agreements rarely change the structure of what David Keen has called the "war system"—a violent political economy composed of competing elites that profit from hostilities as well as the settlements designed to end them.[5]

This is an unwelcome message for many international partners to peace agreements around the world, who tend to cling to the formal aspects of such agreements – the timetables and the implementation matrixes – and neglect the more substantive ways that peace agreements actually produce incentives for further violence. These incentives are created by the very architecture of the agreements.

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(1) Intergovernmental Authority on Development, *The Revitalized Agreement for Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS)*, (Addis Ababa: IGAD, 2018), https://docs.pca-cpa.org/2016/02/South-Sudan-Peace-Agreement-September-2018.pdf.

(2) "Surface Tension: 'Communal' Violence and Elite Ambitions in South Sudan," *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)*, accessed January 10, 2021,
https://acleddata.com/2021/08/19/surface-tension-communal-violence-and-elite-ambitions-in-south-sudan/; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Detailed Findings of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan*, A/HRC/46/CRP.2 (New York: United Nations, 2021),
https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session46/Documents/A_HRC_46_CRP_2.pdf.

(3) Joshua Craze, "The War They Call Peace," *Sidecar*, July 9, 2021,
https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/the-war-they-call-peace.

(4) Sharath Srinivasan, *When Peace Kills Politics: International Intervention and Unending Wars in the Sudans* (London: Hurst, 2021).

(5) David Keen, *Useful Enemies: When Waging Wars Is More Important Than Winning Them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

The Map is Not the Territory

Peace agreements often begin with a mapping of the political territory in a given country. For a peace agreement to be successful, or so the received wisdom goes, it must include the important belligerent parties to a conflict. Too often, however, this initial mapping—indicated by which groups are included in the negotiation of the agreement and further expressed by power-sharing ratios in prospective transitional governments and in proposals for future security sector reform processes—produces a calcified picture of the country: The map may represent how the forces in a country were lined up at some prior point before the conflict, but often falls far short of depicting the real military actors once hostilities are underway.[6]

In South Sudan, for instance, the 2018 peace agreement excludes what is now one of the major military rebel groups in the country—the Kitgwang faction—which in 2021 broke off from the leading opposition group represented in the peace agreement, the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA–IO).[7] It is the SPLA–IO that is afforded the most representation in the transitional government. However, the group has suffered a raft of defections in the past year, and it is increasingly unable to command any support on the ground.

The main opposition groups party to the agreement are unwilling to reopen negotiations and include the Kitgwang faction within the transitional government since they do not want to cede any power to new groups. Thus, the peace agreement itself becomes increasingly unrepresentative of the situation in the country.[8] Unwilling to "restart" a process in which it has invested time and symbolic capital, the international community is also unwilling to reopen negotiations and so perseveres with an agreement that, as is increasingly apparent, is unable to bring a sustainable peace to South Sudan. The map is not the territory.

The situation in South Sudan is paralleled by others across the globe. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the peace agreement that in 2003 seemingly brought an end to the conflict

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(6) Joshua Craze, *The Politics of Numbers: On Security Sector Reform in South Sudan 2005–20* (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2020), https://www.lse.ac.uk/africa/assets/Documents/Politics-of-Numbers-Joshua-Craze.pdf.

(7) Small Arms Survey, *MAAPSS Update No. 7–SPLA–IO Split*, (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2021), https://smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/HSBA-MAAPSS-Update7-September2021-SPLA-IO-Split.pdf.

(8) SPLA–IO politicians, interviewed by the author, Juba, South Sudan, September to November, 2021.

running since the 1990s was unable to address the violence that soared in the east of the country.[9] In Somalia, lengthy international interventions have produced a government that only has legitimacy in the country's capital, Mogadishu.[10] These failures are partly a result of political contestations over who should be included in peace agreements. Too often, international actors substitute their vision of the future of a country, often developed in Washington DC, for the actuality of a country's political economy.

More often, however, these exclusions are not politically instrumental as much as they are structural. The diplomats who work on these agreements are accustomed to living in capitals and dealing with state actors or those who lay claim to the state. This emphasis on state actors tends to produce elite bargains, agreed in the capital, which do not necessarily have any relationship to what happens in the rest of the country. In South Sudan, the ground forces for the civil war were taken from rural male youth alienated from processes of capital accumulation occurring in Juba. The peace agreement, far from addressing this root cause of the war, accentuated it.[11]

Peace Agreements are Engines, Not Cameras

The problem of peace agreements is not just that they form a map that does not represent the territory but that the map, like all such objects, transforms the ground it purports to represent. Peace agreements are engines, not cameras.[12] In South Sudan, an elite compact has formed around the peace agreement itself. Just as in Somalia, a political cartel has profited from the transitional government put in place by the settlement. This cartel has access to resources flowing into the central government and the donor resources proffered by peacebuilding actors. Consequently, it has every incentive to defend its privileges, even if this cartelization of national politics causes the immiseration of the rest of the country. Moreover, it is in the interest of

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(9)   Jason Stearns and Christoph Vogel, *The Landscape of Armed Groups in the Eastern Congo* (New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2015),
https://www.congoresearchgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/CRG-Armed-Groups-in-the-Congo.pdf.

(10) Ken Menkhaus, *Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Somalia Case Study* (London: United Kingdom Stabilisation Unit, 2018),
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/766049/Somalia_case_study.pdf.

(11) Joshua Craze, "Knowledge Will Not Save Us: Stuck in the Mud in South Sudan," *n+1* magazine, Winter 2021,
https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-39/essays/knowledge-will-not-save-us/.

(12) The term borrows from the title of the book by Donald Mackenzie, *An Engine, Not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets*, (Boston: MIT Press, 2012).

this elite to perpetuate chronic state weakness and insecurity in order to ensure donor funds and humanitarian resources continue to flow into the country. Put simply, the status quo has proven profitable to elites in Mogadishu and Juba, and peace agreements, far from producing sustainable peace in South Sudan – just as in Somalia – have proven a fundamental part of a system that is predicated on chronic instability.

The peace agreement in South Sudan has produced a system of incentives that has shaped the actions of the political elite in Juba.[13] This is the engine of the camera. The actions of the international community have been fundamental to enabling this system of incentives and have legitimated a peace agreement that has no legitimacy at all in the rest of the country. The peace agreement has enabled the international community to announce that the country is on the "cusp" of peace. This has resulted in a resurgence of donor funds and International Monetary Fund loans (used by the government to pay the salaries of its security services) and development projects, which the government can direct to loyal constituencies as a form of reward.

The opposition parties to the agreement also benefit from the appearance of peace in the country. From their perches in national government, they gain access to oil revenue, and from their representation in state and local government, they benefit from opportunities to tax humanitarian operations and levy fines on local populations. Continuing the peace agreement has become an end in itself for the elites in Juba, as it is for elites in Mogadishu and Kinshasa. The peace agreements in these countries have become part of a process of elite class-formation, at the cost of the peace and security of the countries in question.

The Depoliticization of Violence

What the South Sudanese peace agreement has not produced is peace. It has rather changed the appearance of violence in the country. For all the actors party to the peace agreement – from the opposition to the government and NGOs to the US$1 billion per year UN mission in the country – it is crucial to insist that ongoing violence should not be characterized as a war. David

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(13) Joshua Craze and Ferenc Davis Marko, "Death by Peace: How the Peace Agreement in South Sudan Destroyed the Grassroots," *African Arguments*, January 8, 2021,
    https://africanarguments.org/2022/01/death-by-peace-how-south-sudans-peace-agreement-ate-the-grassroots/.

Shearer, the United Nation's recently departed top official in the country, repeatedly emphasized that despite the continued conflict between the government and the National Salvation Front – a non-signatory to the peace agreement – in the Equatoria region, there has been a marked reduction in "political violence" between the belligerent parties since 2018.

So how does the international community square the increase in violence in much of South Sudan with an insistence that the peace agreement is working? The UN Security Council has claimed that this violence is largely inter-communal in nature and attributable to a power vacuum that occurred between the signing of the peace agreement in 2018 and the delayed appointment of state ministers and county commissioners in 2020–21.[14] According to this logic – shared by David Shearer and the transitional government – violence between communities is the result of an anarchy brought about by state absence. However, it is essential to lay bare the assumption underpinning this view of how the peace agreement is supposed to function, which is predicated on a normative Weberian model of the state. According to such a model, civil war results from the dissolution of state authority, and peace agreements must reconstitute state authority by re-establishing the state as the sovereign possessor of the monopoly of violence.

The problem with building a settlement for peace based on a Weberian model is that it is at variance with how actual existing states have functioned in global crisis zones since the 1980s.[15] Painting with an admittedly broad brush, one could say that the global debt crises of the 1980s spawned an emergent model of the state in much of the world, which can be found from Somalia to Sudan, and from Afghanistan to Mali, though of course, we should note important regional and national differences that exceed the focus of this short text. In this emergent model of political power, the state largely withdraws from service provision under the pressure of global financial austerity, and instead deploys violence as a tool of population management, often by instrumentalizing regional, religious, or ethnic differences and empowering local leaders as entrepreneurs of violence, who are able to tax, extort, and otherwise behave in a predatory

(14) United Nations Security Council, "Situation in South Sudan: Report of the Secretary-General," S/2020/890 (New York: United Nations, 2020),
https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/situation-south-sudan-report-secretary-general-s2020890.

(15) For a Sudanese example, see Edward Thomas and Magdi el Gizouli, "Creatures of the Deposed: Connecting Sudan's Rural and Urban Struggles," *African Arguments*, November 11, 2021,
https://africanarguments.org/2021/11/creatures-of-the-deposed-connecting-sudans-rural-and-urban-struggles/.

fashion toward local populations as part of emergent rentier political economies. Resource extraction and capital accumulation are largely privatized in the hands of security services and state actors but beyond the state apparatus itself. Stated simply, the state in this new model functions by multiplying the number of actors with the capacity for violence and by fracturing the social base of the country whose welfare it is supposed to ensure.

Against the backdrop of the spread of this predatory state model, the normative presuppositions of peace agreements become problematic. While the state appears to have "intervened" to bring hostilities in South Sudan to a close with the signing of the peace agreement in 2018, this has not prevented conflict but instead produced it. Politicians in Juba no longer take part in a civil war but in an elite compact in the capital, in which an image of a successful peace agreement is given by the fact that the conflict is depoliticized by being named as "inter-communal violence." In reality, however, these very same elites fight wars of position in the capital by deploying and instrumentalizing communitarian forces in the country's periphery, just as they have done in southern Sudan since the global debt crises of the 1980s.

Peace agreements have long encouraged – rather than prevented – this sort of fractionalization in both Sudan and South Sudan. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended Sudan's twenty-two-year civil war was effectively a bilateral agreement between the Sudanese government in Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Problematically, many of the fighting forces within Sudan were not included in this arrangement, which led to the creation of what Alex de Waal calls a political marketplace: a set of armed actors leveraging the threat or actuality of violence to press for concessions, resources, and positions within formal governmental structures that are merely contingent coalitions, brought together by a mutual interest in exploiting the resources of the peace agreement, and little else.[16]

In Sudan, after the signing of the CPA, the southern regional government was worried about militia forces that had been backed by Khartoum during the second Sudanese civil war, and which it feared could disrupt a referendum on secession scheduled for 2011. The South Sudanese leader, Salva Kiir, mimicked the Khartoum playbook and bought them off, offering them

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(16) Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

salaried positions within the South Sudanese army, effectively using oil revenues to outbid the Sudanese government for the militias' loyalty. According to the peace agreement, this was part of a formal process of creating a national army, though, in actuality, the loyalty of the militias did not extend beyond the next payout. Underneath the formal architecture of security sector reform, the peace agreement created a marketplace in which commanders would then frequently rebel and leverage the threat or actuality of violence to secure better positions or wages.

One can see different versions of this process at work in Somalia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere: the real political economy of these countries is one in which militarized actors compete for control of resources, including mining, taxation, and the dividends of peace agreements. The formal nature of internationally backed peace agreements ignores this real political economy and instead focuses on a normative vision of a unified national army, which occludes all the actual material disputes that underpin conflict in these countries. For example, according to the peace agreement in South Sudan, ranks and positions in the newly unified government and army should go to those most qualified for the positions. In reality, there is a finely tuned political and ethnic calculus that sees ranks distributed in a way that appeases a set of powerful military actors who demand control of resource flows into the capital. Competition over these positions produces violence in the rest of the country, as – just as after the CPA – military actors use violence in the periphery as a tool to gain leverage in the capital.

In South Sudan, the transitional government, in theory, brings opposition groups into a unified political apparatus in the capital, and because there is unity in Juba, there should be peace in the rest of the country. However, the fractious elite in Juba rule by fomenting violence in the rest of the country, in line with the model forged by Sudan – among many other countries – after the debt crises of the 1980s. The unity model proposed by the peace agreement has actually created violence. None of this conflict can be called "inter-communal." In my fieldwork in South Sudan and Sudan from September to December 2021, it was clear that all such conflict was sponsored by politicians in the capital. During clashes in Jonglei state in 2020, for instance, the UN Panel of Experts found evidence of politicians and military leaders involved in arming and funding all sides of a conflict that involved Bor Dinka, Lou Nuer, and Murle communitarian militias. This violence is produced by the incentives and rewards offered by the peace agreement itself.

The Normative Fantasy of the Weberian State

So the formal models of internationally backed peace agreements are inadequate to the real substantive nature of the functioning of the state in conflict zones in much of the world. Peace agreements presume the state functions by creating unity. Yet, in conflict zones, the state works by creating disorder and chaos. It would be dark enough if we presumed that this means that these peace agreements *fail*. However, it is more likely that these peace agreements do precisely what they intend to do: create the fiction of a state in the capital within which international partners can negotiate and ensure that violence remains localized and not a threat to regional interests or the inter-state order.

The armature of internationally backed peace agreements has flourished since the end of the Cold War. This dating is not coincidental. The consultant-led peacebuilding industry is bound up with the vision of the "end of history" that was so often imagined in foreign policy circles in the 1990s. The anti-politics of peace agreements is part and parcel of a liberalism that tries to neutralize actual struggles. Rather than seeing violence as part of some overarching goal – an end to colonial rule, say, or revolution – or part of actual material struggles that need to be addressed, contemporary peace agreements see violence itself as the problem. Countries might remain woefully unequal and bereft of socioeconomic justice, but peace agreements can be said to have done their job if war ends. It is an approach that treats the symptoms, not the causes, of conflict and imagines that war is a technical problem to be addressed with technocratic solutions based on overly formal models that neglect the actual material causes of violence.

But seen from this perspective, the failures of these peace agreements are not accidental but intentional. If peace agreements are merely supposed to prevent outright war, then enabling elite compacts in the capital is a rational approach. If stabilization of regional relations is the priority, then setting up a state and giving it international legitimacy—no matter how illegitimate it is on the ground—makes sense. Such a situation obtains in South Sudan and Somalia. Against this backdrop, peace agreements are not a guaranteed path to sustainable peace. Instead, they are all-too-readily instrumentalized by elite actors as merely one more incentive in political

economies of violence predicated on fracturing, rather than forging, a national compact. To be otherwise, peace agreements would have to abandon their focus on elite-focused formal frameworks and actually address the real political economy of the countries they are supposed to bring peace to.

About the Author

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