

IGAD¹ and South Sudan: Success and Failure in Mediation

Irit Back

Some appear to believe that IGAD's glory days – when it served as a mediator between the north and south of Sudan and was considered as an effective regional mediator between rival parties in east Africa – are over. The *South Sudan News Agency* (SSNA) reported that IGAD-led negotiations "have become part of recurrent jokes among many leaders of the African Union."² Yet a careful examination of the mediation efforts of this East African regional organization suggests that it has played a constructive and helpful role in today's ethnic and political conflicts in South Sudan, which became independent in July 2011. Moreover, the case of IGAD's intervention in the conflict between north and south Sudan during the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century illustrates how proactive intervention and mediation by a regional organization can contribute to modest success in ameliorating conflicts.

Much of the success of the north-south dialogue in Sudan can be attributed to a massive diplomatic effort by IGAD. The efforts to find a solution to the decades-long civil war between the north and the south (the first phase lasted from 1955 to 1972, and the second from 1983 to 2005), had already started in 1992–1993, when the Organization of African Unity (OAU) initiated the Abuja peace talks. However, these talks failed and further OAU efforts were limited.³ In the wake of the failure, the Sudanese government approached the regional body of the Inter-Government Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) during its 1993

¹ An acronym for the "Intergovernmental Authority on Development," an eight country organization of east African states that includes: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda.

² "[Exclusive: IGAD-led peace talks are not convincing](#)," *South Sudan News Agency* (SSNA), November 15, 2014.

³ Steven Wondou and Ann Lesch, *Battle for Peace in Sudan: An Analysis of the Abuja Conferences, 1992-93* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000).

summit,⁴ asking its leaders to mediate in the Sudanese conflict. In response, an IGAD sub-committee on conflict resolution was established and included the presidents of Kenya, Uganda, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. It was IGAD's first political mediation effort; until then the organization had mainly focused on ecological disaster relief work.

The Sudanese government had agreed to IGAD's diplomatic initiative because its Islamist policies had come under strong international diplomatic and financial pressure following the Islamic revolution of 1989. The ideological underpinnings of the revolution were provided by Hasan al-Turabi, yet it was accompanied from its beginning by internal struggles for dominance within the ruling National Islamic Front (NIF), especially between Turabi and Omar al-Bashir. Soon it became clear that al-Bashir was the dominant force in the NIF party. It also became clear that the new party was sticking to the established order of northern-Islamic hegemony over the country, at the expense of the predominantly Christian south.

Despite its concerns about IGAD's disposition toward the Sudanese government, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A; the movement that led the southern rebellion during the second phase of the civil war) had several reasons for participating in the mediation process, including its inability to achieve victory in combat. Eventually, the north-south mediation process continued for more than a decade, and experienced progress and setbacks, the latter owing to intra-Sudanese factors as well as external factors, such as the split within IGAD following the Ethiopia-Eritrea War from 1998 to 2000.⁵ Yet, IGAD's active mediation, combined with the unanimous support of the African Union (AU),⁶ was translated into the 2005 Comprehensive Peace agreement (CPA) between the south and the north, that eventually resulted in South Sudan's declaration of independence (on July 9, 2011). South Sudan's independence was an historic development, one that challenged the sacred African post-colonial principle of the sanctity of colonial borders. It would not have been achieved (and certainly not with the same speed and efficiency) without the active mediation efforts of IGAD and many AU members, which largely supported the south Sudanese claim against the northern ruling elite.

One of the world's most underdeveloped countries, the nascent South Sudan was an extremely fragile state. The euphoria of its historic achievement was almost

⁴ In 1993, IGADD changed its name by dropping "Drought" and became known as IGAD.

⁵ For a detailed description of IGAD's mediation efforts in the north-south conflict, see: Ruth Iyob and Gilbert M. Khadiagala, *Sudan: The Elusive Quest for Peace* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 101-132.

⁶ The African Union (AU) was established in 2002, replacing the OAU.

immediately overshadowed by internal strife. Indeed, even prior to independence, in March 2011, after losing the election to another SPLM candidate, former SPLM General George Athor Deng led a militia that clashed with SPLM forces. The clashes between Athor – who justified his actions as a response to the undemocratic and corrupt behavior of the SPLM, and accused the ruling party of committing "crimes against humanity" against its opponents – and SPLM forces resumed in the eastern Jonglei State after independence, claiming the lives of countless numbers of people and displacing tens of thousands, who fled their homes for the relative safety of the bush. Consequently, these events significantly increased the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in South Sudan.⁷

In mid-December 2013, internal tensions were exacerbated by a power struggle between President Salva Kiir and his deputy, former Vice President Riek Machar. Fighting erupted between government forces and those loyal to Machar. This conflict has a clear ethnic character, as the two rivals represent the two primary ethnic groups in South Sudan: Kiir represents the Dinka, and Machar the Nuer. Yet behind the ethnic conflict, there were various political interests. Indeed, although Kiir and Machar were at times fighting side-by-side during the north-south conflict, at other points they fought against each other. After independence, although both men kept their leadership positions in the ruling party, Machar and some of the other party members became more openly critical of Kiir, accusing him of heavy-handed tactics and undemocratic and dictatorial tendencies. Kiir, for his part, accused Machar and his followers of attempting a coup-d'état. On ground, the result of the rivalry between the factions was an escalation in violence between the two rivals' supporters, which has severely damaged the new state: Tens of thousands of people are believed to have been killed in the bloodshed. Of a total population of 12 million, 1.4 million people have been displaced inside the country, and nearly half a million have sought refuge outside the country. Moreover, almost the entire population of South Sudan is in some degree at risk of famine.⁸

It is in this tenuous environment that IGAD has again been trying to mediate, in this case primarily between the rival parties within South Sudan (although it is important to note that tensions and disagreements still exist between South Sudan and Sudan, its northern neighbor). Recently, for example, IGAD has been planning to promote a power-sharing arrangement between Kiir and Machar during its upcoming summit. However, this attempt to broker an agreement faces several obstacles, both logistically (such as making sure all of the invited

⁷ "South Sudan: Briefing on Jonglei violence," *IRIN*, 10 February 2012.

⁸ "[Uprooted by Conflict: South Sudan's Displacement Crisis](#)," International Rescue Committee, November 2014,

parties are able to attend the meeting in Addis Ababa, the location for the summit) and substantively, due to the mistrust between the parties. Machar has accused IGAD (and more broadly the AU) of favoritism towards the existing ruling party, while the president accused the United Nation Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) of supporting the rebels' cause.⁹

Even if an agreement can be achieved during the upcoming summit, the situation on ground is still explosive and IGAD's continued mediation will likely be necessary in the long run. If the two sides fail to reach an agreement, IGAD is likely to try to impose sanctions on one or both of the protagonists such as travel bans and an arms embargo. In addition to its diplomatic efforts, IGAD is also trying to encourage local initiatives for resolving the conflict, such as the National Platform for Peace and Reconciliation (NPPR), a local union of church groups and civil society organizations who, it may be said, represent the public at large, the real victims of the conflict.

In addition to South Sudan, IGAD is also involved in mediating other conflicts, such as in Somalia. IGAD's involvement there can be traced back to 2005, when the Somalia Transitional Federal Government (TFG) was established in Kenya following two years of IGAD-sponsored peace talks between various Somali clans and factions. In September 2006, the AU endorsed the IGAD Peace Support Mission in Somalia (IGASOM) to support the TFG's relocation to Mogadishu from Nairobi.¹⁰ IGAD is still involved in many aspects of the Somali mediation efforts, including one between rival parties during recent presidential elections.¹¹ IGAD's institutional experience accumulated during many years of active mediation in East Africa, marked by both successes and failures, will continue to be needed in a region where old conflicts refuse to die and new conflicts are emerging.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on approximately the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

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⁹ "Machar decries Juba's comments on power-sharing deal," *Sudan Tribune*, November 13, 2014.

¹⁰ Cecilia Hull and Emma Svensson, *African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM): Exemplifying African Union Peacekeeping Challenges*, Report No. FOI-R--2596--SE, Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Agency, 2008.

¹¹ ["IGAD Statement on the Election of the President of South West Region of Somalia."](#)

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