

**THE AFRICAN UNION'S EFFORTS IN ADDRESSING THE CIVIL WAR IN
SUDAN (2023- PRESENT): A CASE STUDY OF EL FASHER IN THE DARFUR
REGION**

ISAAC AARON ERERENG

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DECLARATION

I hereby write to declare that, all that is written in this dissertation is my own work and has never been submitted to any other institution of learning for any award.

Signature:..........

Date:.....11/5/2026.....

APPROVAL

This dissertation is entitled “The African Union’s efforts in addressing the civil war in Sudan (2023-present): a case study of El Fasher in the Darfur region” and was written by ERERENG AARON ISAAC M23B56/005 and is submitted to the faculty of Social Sciences of Uganda Christian University as one of the requirements for the award of a Bachelor’s Degree in Governance and International Relations.

Signature:.....

Date:.....05/05/2026

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the institutions that work tirelessly to end conflict in Sudan by acting as mediators, as well as those people who put their lives on the line for the attainment of peace and development in Sudan.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Firstly, I thank God for enabling me reach this far in my academic journey.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SAF	-	Sudanese Armed Forces.
RSF	-	Rapid Support Forces.
APSA	-	The African Peace and Security Architecture.
AU	-	African Union.
EU	-	European Union.
PSC	-	Peace and Security Council.
UNAMID-		United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur.
UN	-	United Nations.
ICC	-	International Criminal Court.
AMIS	-	African Union Mission in Sudan.
OAU	-	Organization of African Unity.
IGAD	-	Intergovernmental Authority on Development.
ACHPR-		African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.
ICRC	-	International Committee of the Red Cross.
CEWS	-	Continental Early Warning System.
R2P	-	Responsibility to Protect.
SLA	-	Sudanese Liberation Army.
JEM	-	Justice and Equality Movement.
UAE	-	United Arab Emirates.
DDPD	-	Doha Document for Peace in Darfur.
AU PSC-		African Union Peace and Security Council.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how the African Union institutionally reacted to the conflict, particularly in El Fasher between April 2023 and February 2026. The study is guided by five interrelated research questions: to explore the mechanisms of the peace and security of the AU and how they were employed in El Fasher; to evaluate the effectiveness of the institution of the four dimensions of operations, ceasefire compliance, civilian protection, humanitarian access and accountability; to determine the role of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights as an accountability institution; and suggest practical steps to enhance the capacity of the institution to manage conflicts and build peace.

The research is a single case study (qualitative) based on the methodological approach of Creswell and Poth (2018). Only secondary sources such as official documents of the UN and the Peace and Security Council, ACHPR documents, scholarly literature were used as sources of data. Bowen (2009) protocol of document analysis was used to provide a systematic and consistent extraction of data in all sources.

The results indicate that there is an enduring and causal disconnect between the normative commitments and operational capacities of the AU. Several institutional mechanisms initiated by the African Peace and Security Architecture, an AU Roadmap to Sudan, a High-Level Panel formed in early 2024 and a May 2024 PSC mandate authorizing the ACHPR to investigate atrocities in El Fasher were all activated by the AU, however none of this could stop the siege or the eventual fall of the city.

The dissertation suggests complete operationalization of the African Standby Force, integration of the disjointed Sudan policy of the African Union, a regional conference to discuss the issue of external interference, structural reform of the ACHPR and strategic exploitation of the comparative political advantage of the African Union with Khartoum to gain entry to humanitarian access. These suggestions are directly based on the evidence presented at El Fasher, and not based on generic prescription of the institution, and presented as a contribution to the academic and policy discussion around the changing role of the AU in peace and security in Africa.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1 Introduction

Armed conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), under the command of General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), under the command of General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti, erupted on 15 April 2023 in Sudan. What started as power struggle in Khartoum soon swept the country, leading to one of the worst humanitarian tragedies in Africa in recent history. By the turn of the fourth year of the war, tens of thousands of people had died, more than 12 million displaced, and more than 30 million needed humanitarian aid. El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, is one of the most destroyed cities in this conflict, having been besieged 18 months and finally captured by the RSF forces in October 2025. The magnitude of civilian casualties documented their mass murders, hospital bombings and the systematic obstructing of food supplies make it one of the most pressing cases to consider in the context of the study of the reaction of African institutions to ongoing atrocities.

The main peace and security institution in the continent is the African Union (AU) and its role in such a situation is well defined. The organisation has the right to intervene in the member states where the war crimes, genocide, or crimes against humanity are taking place as stipulated in the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act of the AU. The response to the Sudan conflict by the AU has included a series of actions following a Roadmap to the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan, the creation of a High-Level Panel on Sudan in early 2024, frequent Peace and Security Council (PSC) communiqués demanding ceasefires and the most recent denunciation of atrocities in El Fasher. The question that this dissertation poses is a very simple and yet uneasy one: have all these efforts been worth anything?

The reasons why El Fasher is selected as the center of study are much more than its size or location. It was the strategic and symbolic centre of the conflict in the region as the last state capital in Darfur to be under the government control. It is also the place where the most institutionally significant response of the AU to the May 2024 mandate to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

(ACHPR) to investigate atrocities there occurred. There is a long history of violence in Darfur itself, which dates back to the genocide of the early 2000s, and which informs the character of the current crisis and the demands on the AU. By concentrating on El Fasher, this paper will be able to take the analysis past the general institutional analysis and look at what commitments of the AU are really like when put into practice.

This chapter provides the background of the research. It starts with the context of the 2023 conflict and the strategic importance of El Fasher, and follows the changing reaction of the AU. It identifies the research problem, objectives and questions that will guide the research, justification of the research and geographical, content and time area that analysis will be done.

1.1.1 The Outbreak of the 2023 Sudan Civil War

The Sudan war did not come as a surprise. It began with the political unrest that ensued the overthrow of long-time president Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, following months of mass protests fomenting due to economic hardship and general anger at three decades of authoritarian leadership. The next thing was a weak power sharing system between civilian political forces and military, a shaky alliance that pleased neither party and was never constructed to be sustainable. That arrangement ultimately failed in October 2021 when General al-Burhan and General Hemedti orchestrated a military coup together, disbanding the transitional civilian government and uniting all power under the military.

The significance of the 2023 war is that it was not a coup against civilians and it was a dispute between two men who had jointly staged the coup. The main issue in their conflict was whether the RSF would become a part of the regular Sudanese Armed Forces and on what conditions. The RSF had become a strong, semi-autonomous entity with its own economic interests, especially in gold mining, and Hemedti was not ready to give up that independence in the framework of a merger that would place him under the authority of al-Burhan. The two generals were unable to agree on the command structure and the timing of the democratic transition as international actors and Sudanese pro-democracy groups had insisted that the RSF integration be a prerequisite of any democratic transition. The disputes that had simmered months, erupted into open warfare on 15 April 2023,

with the initial combat being particularly intense in Khartoum and then spreading quickly across the nation.

By 2023, the human toll was already dire. It had killed thousands of people, displaced an estimated seven million people, one of the fastest growing displacement crises in the world at the time. It was at this initial stage that El Fasher started to attract certain attention. When the Abu Shok displacement camp within the city came under attack, Moussa Faki Mahamat, the then Chairperson of the AU Commission, publicly sounded the alarm over the situation, a location which had previously been used to host civilians who had fled previous spurts of violence in Darfur. That timely alert turned out to be vital, El Fasher would become the epicenter of the worst atrocities of the conflict, and the most direct, albeit ultimately ineffective, institutional response of the AU.

1.1.2 Strategic Significance of El Fasher.

El Fasher is not a mere city, it is where there is a lot of historical and cultural significance to the Darfur people. It has been the seat of the Sultanate of Darfur since ancient times, and has long been a commercial, administrative and humanitarian centre to the rest of the region, being the capital of the North Darfur state. Prior to the war, the city was home to almost half a million inhabitants. This figure was greatly increased when hundreds of thousands of civilians who had been displaced by previous spurts of violence in Darfur arrived there, which meant that El Fasher was at the same time a city of strength and a city of compounded vulnerability.

By 2024, when the ongoing conflict escalated, El Fasher would also be the final major urban center under government control in Darfur. The four other state capitals in the area, Nyala, Zalingei and Geneina in South, Central and West Darfur, had already been captured by the RSF, making El Fasher a strategic target and a symbol of whatever was left of SAF control in the area. The possession of the city was important to the government not only militarily but also in terms of reputation. To further enhance its strategic importance, El Fasher had once been the seat of the United Nations-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) before the mission was pulled out in 2020. The infrastructure abandoned, roads, compounds, communication facilities did not stand on their own. It was engulfed

into the war-related environment of a city that is at war, which serves as a reminder that the international disengagement does not often leave a blank page.

What ensued was one of the most recorded humanitarian disasters of the war. Starting in early 2024, RSF troops besieged El Fasher over a year and a half, progressively isolating it, cutting off food, medicine, and movement. Resident areas were shell shocked. Hospitals were bombed. Aid convoy was ambushed and sent back. The officials of the United Nations characterized the situation within the city as a hell on earth, which, though being a rather harsh expression, was rather a record of reality than a hyperbole. By October 2025, when El Fasher was captured by the RSF, more than one million people had fled. About 260 thousand individuals stayed within the city, and they had no access to food or medical assistance. They are not abstract statistics. They are the embodiment of all the protection mechanisms, local, regional, and continental, that were to guard against just this eventuality.

1.1.3 The Response of the African Union that is Evolving.

The African Union reaction towards the Sudan conflict was not decisive but gradual. During the first months of fighting that broke out in April 2023, the major topic of the agenda of the AU was the call to the ceasefire and providing its support to Jeddah Process, the mediation process organized by the United States and Saudi Arabia. Such early measures were mostly diplomatic in nature, and entailed words and communiques, and no institutional resources were used. A more momentous institutional change occurred in May 2024, when the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights was officially given the mandate by the AU Peace and Security Council to probe alleged crimes against humanity in El Fasher and other areas of Darfur, and to issue recommendations on how those responsible should be held accountable.

At least that was a symbolic requirement. The slow, cautious, and calibrated responses of the AU to conflict situations have been one of the most constant criticisms of the organization in situations where it is needed most; to save civilians. When the PSC decided to author a direct human rights investigation, in a war-torn country, to focus on certain atrocities, it was a more aggressive stance than the AU was accustomed to taking in Sudan. It was an indicator or at least a

hint that the days when perpetrators were able to act without any continental questions could be questioned.

The rhetoric campaign of the AU escalated even more after El Fasher fell to the control of RSF forces in October 2025. The Chairperson of the AU Commission, Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, came out to condemn the war crimes and ethnic killings that were being reported in the city and he simply said that there could not be a military solution to the crisis. The next action was an communique by the AU Peace and Security Council that demanded the identities of the external actors who were funding and equipping the parties to the conflict, an oblique allusion to the growing evidence of UAE military assistance to the RSF, such as the alleged delivery of armed drones. The naming of external interference as a problem was a significant move in an institution that has traditionally been hesitant to openly criticize the actions of influential non-African actors.

Questions of whether all this was leading to an effective response are quite another thing. There were three structural issues that would always restrict what the AU could practically do in El Fasher. First, there was no significant enforcement mechanism in the organisation, its ceasefire demands were disregarded severally by both the SAF and the RSF since there was no viable repercussion to ignoring such demands. Second, the UN mediation process was somehow divided into several competing processes such as the Jeddah Process and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development which enabled the warring parties to selectively participate in the process which would favor their short-term interests. Third, the suspended membership of the AU in Sudan posed what scholars have termed as a legitimacy trap, the AU had to negotiate with the very actors whose unconstitutional takeover of power had resulted in its suspension in the first place, thus the AU had no leverage in politics over either party. These were not short-term impediments. They were the structural aspects of the situation in Sudan of the AU, and they defined all the responses of the organization.

1.2 Historical Perspective

1.2.1 Darfur: A Region Affected by Conflict

One needs to count the cost that Darfur has already paid to comprehend the importance of El Fasher in the present conflict. The area has a history of armed violence over the decades, although the most catastrophic was that which followed 2003 when the government of Omar al-Bashir reacted to a non-Arab rebellion by unleashing a brutal counter-insurgency operation. The Janjaweed, Arab militias who fought alongside government forces were central to that campaign whose tactics included systematic ethnic cleansing, mass killing, rape, and wholesale destruction of villages. The Janjaweed are not a footnote in history. They are the direct institutional antecedents of the RSF, i.e. the same command, impunity, and ethnic targeting networks that characterized the 2003 genocide have re-emerged in the present war under a new name.

The magnitude of the events that occurred in Darfur during 2003-2009 was astounding. It is estimated that as many as 300,000 individuals were killed and many millions displaced, which caused the International Criminal Court to issue arrest warrants against al-Bashir on counts of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. It was also in reaction to this crisis, that the first of its major peacekeeping missions was sent by the AU; the AU Mission in Sudan, or AMIS, which was deployed between 2004 and 2007. AMIS was a serious undertaking in principle, but was crippled in practice. It was long-term underfunded, had too few soldiers to guard the territory it was supposed to, and was hampered by a mandate that restricted its proactive defense of civilians. This mission echoed the trend that would be followed in future engagements by the AU institutional willingness but not institutional capacity.

To those who lived through those times, El Fasher was a place of something special, a place you could be somewhat safe. The Abu Shok displacement camp, which is within the city, had a history of over two decades of sheltering Darfurians who fled their violence. It was no easy life, but it was a life. That precarious feeling of safety crumbled when combat arrived in El Fasher at the end of 2023. Notably, in December 2023, the chairman of the AU Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, released a statement admitting to the attacks on Abu Shok, claiming

that the situation is highly distressing to communities who had been living twenty years without any solution to the displacement problem. The camp was now, in the most hideous manner, the haven people had taken flight to, and the thing they now had to fly away out of. That is the historical baggage that El Fasher brings to the present-day conflict, and why the inability of the AU to defend it cannot be constrained to standard institutional analysis.

1.2.2 African Union and Sudan: A Bad Relationship.

The association of the AU with Sudan has never been easy and most of that challenge can be traced back to the manner in which the main regional institution of the continent had been dealing with the governments who assumed power through force. The Organization of African Unity, the predecessor of the present day, the African Union, did nothing to stop or take any significant action when Omar al-Bashir assumed power in 1989, in a military coup. This was in line with the founding principle of the OAU of not interfering in the internal affairs of member states, a doctrine that placed state sovereignty as the most important doctrine, even when that sovereignty belonged to an unelected military government.

In 2002, the OAU became the African Union and the normative landscape changed considerably. The AU took a radically new stance regarding unconstitutional changes of government, and was based on the Lomé Declaration of 2000, which had already determined that coups were no longer acceptable in the continental system. In this new practice, the member states which had witnessed military takeovers would be suspended in the activities of the AU until constitutional order was restored. In October of 2021, when the SAF and the RSF toppled a transitional civilian government in Sudan together, the AU acted on this principle and suspended the membership of Sudan.

That ruling, however, brought about an issue that the AU has not been able to solve since then. Suspending Sudan was a move by the AU to indicate its disapproval of the military leaders although it still had to go into a negotiation with the leaders to stand a chance of getting any influence in the conflict. This contradiction is best summarized by Amare (2025) in the legitimate trap concept where the AU is forced to deal with actors whose status it does not acknowledge and the actors have learned to take advantage of the grey area to withstand the

pressure of the AU. The SAF and RSF were able to engage in processes led by the AU at their own convenience and reject the authority of the AU at other times since the suspension had taken away the most immediate institutional leverage of the organization. This pitfall did not only make it difficult to mediate between the two in Sudan by the AU. It arguably paralysed it

1.2.3 Past AU Peace Mission in Darfur.

The participation of the AU in Darfur did not start in 2023. The organization has a history of trying to control violence in this region dating back more than 20 years and it is important to know that history to determine whether anything has changed in the way the AU responds. The initial significant assessment occurred in 2004, as the AU sent the African Mission in Sudan, called AMIS, in reaction to the genocide that was occurring in Darfur. In the case of a continental organization that was new to the replacement of the OAU, the use of a peacekeeping mission within about a year of a crisis building up was a significant demonstration of organizational will. In actual sense, though, AMIS did not receive what it required to succeed. It was long underfunded, had significantly fewer troops available than the situation demanded and had a mandate that hampered its capacity to act proactively to defend civilians. It monitored. It documented. But it was powerless to prevent what was occurring. In 2007, the mission was recognized to have these drawbacks, and was restructured into the United Nations-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur, UNAMID, which incorporated UN resources and authority into a combined system with the AU.

Two lessons that were learned during the AMIS experience are still directly applicable in the present crisis in El Fasher. The first one is that the AU can operate at a relative pace when political will is available, the decision to deploy has been taken and implemented regardless of the limited resources of the organisation and its infancy in institutional development. The second lesson is more painful. The root cause of the failure of AMIS was that the Sudanese government was one of the key actors of violence, and the mission relied on the same government to provide access, logistical and operational space. It is a paradox that the AU has never satisfactorily addressed the challenges of holding a government accountable to atrocities and at the same time depending on such a

government to operate. The same contradiction has again emerged in a new shape in the present conflict, where the AU is required to deal with the SAF and RSF, who have been accused of committing atrocities, and still seek to portray themselves as a legitimate impartial mediator. AMIS failed to address this issue. There is nothing yet that succeeded it, in either.

1.3 Statement of the Problem.

The cost of the Sudan war in human terms is now well known. But what is going on in El Fasher is not just the national aggregate. Siege, starvation, house and hospital bombing, and the methodical denial of humanitarian aid all took their toll on the city, which capitulated to RSF troops in October 2025. Upon its fall, there were reports of mass killings with an estimated 2,000 unarmed civilians being killed including patients in a maternity hospital. These are not the collateral victims of inner-city conflict. They are the recorded effects of a calculated attack on civilian life, and they were in a city which the African Union had singled out as a location which needed immediate protection.

The failure of the El Fasher by the AU is not a failure of consciousness or institutional discourse. The organisation did not keep quiet. It took a Roadmap to resolving the conflict in Sudan, created a High-Level Panel at the beginning of 2024, published regular Peace and Security Council communiques that demanded ceasefires and humanitarian access, and instructed the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to conduct an atrocities investigation of the city. The issue is that all these efforts failed to prevent the siege, save civilians, and hold those who committed the crimes accountable. It does make a difference between an institution that responds and an institution that responds well. In El Fasher, the latter was not met but the former was proved by the AU.

There are four structural constraints as to why. To begin with, there is no credible enforcement mechanism of the AU. The SAF and the RSF repeatedly disregarded PSC ceasefire demands without any action being taken against them, since the enforcing of the ceasefire by the AU had no credible way of doing it. Second, the suspended membership of Sudan posed the legitimacy trap of Amare (2025), as the AU had to negotiate with the same military actors whose unconstitutional coup led to the suspension, the organization had practically no political leverage over either

party. Third, the decentralization of mediation among various tracks of competing processes between the United States and the Saudi Arabia (the High-Level Panel of the United Nations, the Jeddah Process, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development) enabled the warring parties to selectively interact with whichever process was to their immediate advantage, without any obligation of any particular structure. This is what conflict scholars refer to as forum shopping and this systematically diluted the influence of the AU. Fourth, the military balance in Darfur was changed by external military assistance, especially the alleged supply of armed drones by the United Arab Emirates to the RSF, which made the latter less sensitive to any diplomatic pressure, even that of the AU.

The credibility issue of the response of the AU is in itself. A major institutional move was to have the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights investigate atrocities in El Fasher. But the record of the Commission is one to raise grave doubts. It also did a study of the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia but did not publish its results. It did not even put up any serious inquiry into the Libyan crisis. A history of non-publication and non-completion, when it comes to the institution, entails a high cost in credibility when it comes to assigning one of the most sensitive and politically charged investigations on the continent.

Although there is an increasing academic focus on the peace and security architecture of the AU, there is an obvious literature gap in the area concerning the specific, localised peace and security response of the organisation to the post-2023 Sudan conflict. The vast majority of literature either generalises the performance of an AU institution or compares the performance of the organisation in a number of conflicts, without taking a closer look at how the interventions, or lack thereof, of the organisation unfolded in a specific location at the specific time. The dissertation attempts to fill this gap by engaging in a narrow case study of El Fasher, not only what the AU did, but what difference, or whether it made a difference, it made on the ground.

That is not the only question that is important in this city. Unless the AU is willing to scrutinize its own ineptitude, in El Fasher, in Tigray, in Libya, the same systemic flaws will persist in informing its reaction to the next crisis, and the one after that. To the residents of El Fasher and Darfur, in general, who have suffered

decades of violence with little to no responsibility, the question of why continental peace mechanisms have not safeguarded them is not an academic abstraction. The main political question of their life is it. Part of this dissertation is an effort to do so.

1.4 Purpose

The main objective of the study is to critically discuss how the African Union solved the civil war in Sudan in 2023 up to date, basing it on El Fasher in Darfur region. By examining how the efforts of the AU to provide peace, security to the civilians and accountability in this strategically important city, this study aims at establishing the challenges in time to limit the impact of the organization.

1.4.2 General Objective

The idea is to investigate how African Union has been responding to the Sudan civil war and its effectiveness in application in the context of this case, the district of El Fasher, in Darfur region.

1.4.3 Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are:

- i. To examine the key initiatives undertaken by the African Union in addressing the Sudan civil war (2023-present), with specific reference to their application in El Fasher in the Darfur region.
- ii. To evaluate the effectiveness of the African Union's interventions in promoting ceasefire, protection of civilians, humanitarian access, and accountability in El Fasher in the Darfur region.
- iii. To analyse the role of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in investigating alleged human rights violations in El Fasher, and assess the challenges it faces in executing its mandate.
- iv. To assess the internal and external factors that have influenced the effectiveness of the African Union's efforts in managing the conflict in El Fasher in the Darfur region.
- v. To propose practical and evidence-based recommendations for enhancing the African Union's conflict management and peacebuilding efforts in Sudan and similar contexts in Africa.

1.5 Research Questions

- i. What key initiatives has the African Union undertaken to address the Sudan civil (2023-present), and how have these initiatives been applied in El Fasher in the Darfur region?
- ii. To what extent have the African Union's efforts contributed to ceasefire compliance, protection of civilians, humanitarian access, and accountability in El Fasher in the Darfur region?
- iii. What role has the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights played in investigating alleged human rights violations in El Fasher in the Darfur region, and what challenges has it encountered in executing its mandate?
- iv. What internal and external factors have influenced the effectiveness of the African Union's efforts in managing the conflict in El Fasher in the Darfur region?
- v. What measures can be adopted to strengthen the African Union's conflict management and peacebuilding efforts in El Fasher and similar conflict contexts in Africa?

1.6 Significance of the Study.

There are a number of different audiences who are interested in this study and it is worth being clear as to what each of them will gain out of it.

This dissertation offers a degree of granular, place-based analysis that is uncommon among larger institutional studies to academic scholars studying conflict resolution and regional organizations. Majority of the available literature on the role of the AU in peace and security focuses on discussing the organization architecture in general or a comparison of its work in several conflicts at the same time. This study can trace precisely how the decisions, communiqués, mandates, condemnations, did or did not result in protective consequences on the ground at the institution of the city in question by concentrating on one city over a specific time frame. It also interacts with such theoretical frameworks as ripeness theory and mediation effectiveness theory and tests their explanatory power in the particular and complex context of the Sudan conflict. The connection between institutional legitimacy deficit of the AU that is most pronounced in the example of suspended membership by Sudan and the practical capacity of the latter to

mediate is one of the aspects that have been especially underresearched in the literature. This dissertation directly fills that gap, but it also serves to add to the emerging literature on the topic of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights as an accountability institution in active conflict zones.

To policymakers in the AU and its member states, the results of this study provide practical evidence-based information on the points at which the conflict management structures of the organisations are failing and the reasons behind it. As opposed to offering generic suggestions on how institutional reform should be, this paper bases its analysis on a particular case, El Fasher, and poses the question of what would have had to be different, both institutionally and politically, to have made the response of the AU more effective. Such an analysis based upon cases would be more helpful to a policy maker than abstract institutional criticism, as it would help define the particular points, enforcement power, mediation organization, management of external interference, where leverage is in fact available. The study also contributes to the ongoing discussions on the way the relationship between the AU and sub-regional organizations such as IGAD should be organized and the way the organization should react when external forces such as the UAE in the case of Sudan actively sabotage the peace efforts in the continent.

This research is important to the people who are most directly affected by this conflict in a different and more immediate sense. The El Fasher and the Darfur communities in general have been living with decades of violence, genocide in the early 2000s, and the cycles of displacement, and currently, a new siege and very little responsibility is held to the perpetrators. This study adds to the historical account of institutional response and failure by stringently reporting what the AU failed to do and did during the El Fasher crisis. It poses accountability questions to which the affected communities have a right to have been asked on their behalf: why did the ceasefire conditions not work, why was the Standby Force never mobilized, and why has the Commission investigation not resulted in published findings? Learning about the loopholes in the response of the AU is a step towards bridging the same in future conflicts.

Lastly, to the practitioners in the field of peace and security, diplomats, humanitarian coordinators, civil society organisations based in or near Sudan, this research will provide an honest judgment of what the decisions of the AU actually appear like when they are translated to the level of operation. The gap between a PSC communique released in Addis Ababa and the realities on the ground facing aid workers as they attempt to reach El Fasher are often quite large. This paper charts that distance, where it is broadest, and where it may be most fruitfully where international and regional actors can best concentrate their efforts.

1.7 Study Justification.

Timeliness. In February 2026, the Sudan conflict was in its fourth year without a ceasefire in place and a political settlement in sight. The most recent and most important change in the organisational involvement in the crisis is the collapse of El Fasher in October 2025, and the institutional reaction of the AU to it, which included the denunciation of the war crimes by the Chairperson of the AU Commission and the request of the PSC to identify the external sponsors. The study was done when these developments were still taking place and as a consequence, it is not a project that tries to re-create any of these responses in hindsight but rather, it reflects on them as they occur. The immediacy is not only convenient, it is analytically useful, in the sense that it enables the study to evaluate the actions of the AU prior to the fact that the outcome of their actions is filtered by the subsequent interpretation or institutional modification.

Selection of case study. El Fasher is not chosen randomly but due to the fact that it is in this place that the most important aspects of the whole conflict are concentrated. Being the final state capital still under government control in Darfur, it became a military prize, as well as a symbolic test of the SAF strength. It had been decades old, and the siege started with already one of the most vulnerable populations in Sudan, as it was the home of displaced civilians of previous violence spurts. The particular venue also led to the most direct response to accountability of the AU, the May 2024 PSC mandate to the ACHPR. And the cold-blooded, planned character of the attacks on the civilians there, the shelling of civilian quarters, the bombardment of hospitals, the interception of food convoys, make El Fasher one of the most convenient experiments available as to

whether regional peace mechanisms are capable of operating in conditions of active atrocity. There is no other place in the conflict that is a combination of all these dimensions.

Institutional focus. African Union is the main continental organization that has the mandate to uphold peace and security in Africa and Sudan poses the most challenging current challenge. The discussion of the performance of the AU in El Fasher, the action they took, the action that they did not take, and why, all adds to more general inquiries into the ability of regional organisations to meet their protection mandate in unfavourable political conditions. The present study also pays close attention to such an institution as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights which has been the subject of relatively little scholarly attention although this institution is the main human rights accountability instrument of the AU. Its presence in El Fasher, the Virtual Joint Fact-Finding Mission, the structural limitations it encountered and the ambiguity of its findings, is more worthy of academic attention than it has hitherto had.

Research gap. The current body of knowledge of the role of the AU in peace and security in Sudan is large but skewed. Scholars like Bah (2008, 2009), Dung et al. (2024), and Russo (2024) have some useful institutional and comparative analysis, although most of their research was conducted prior to the expansion of the conflict in 2023 or at the national level without analyzing the actual implementation of the decisions of the AU in particular locations. The connection between the lack of legitimacy of the AU created by the suspended membership of Sudan and its ability to mediate in practice has been recognized as a problem but not examined in detail at the case level. The El Fasher probe of the ACHPR is a first. This dissertation directly fills in these gaps through a combination of institutional analysis and a narrow and evidence-based analysis of events in a single city during a specific time frame.

Ethical imperative. The El Fasher and Darfur communities at large have survived intertwined periods of violence, genocide, displacement, siege and atrocity, over a span of over 20 years, with nearly no significant accountability on the perpetrators. The global and regional reaction to every crisis has been accused of being inadequate and the same has been the case in the ongoing conflict. It is not

merely an academic exercise to conduct rigorous analysis of why the response of the AU was not enough. It is a contribution to the political and moral debate on what these communities are due in terms of protection, accountability and honest institutional reckoning. Unless the same failures are critically analyzed, then there is no hope that they will not recur in the next crisis, and the next one.

1.8 The scope of the study is as follows

1.8.1 Geographical Scope

This paper has a geographical target of El Fasher, which is the capital of North Darfur state in Sudan. That decision is not inadvertent and needs to be explained. El Fasher is not just another city among many that were impacted by conflicts, but it is the place where many of the most important aspects of the Sudan crisis intersected at the same time. It is the final state capital in Darfur to have been under government control and thus the centre of the military battle between the SAF and the RSF in the area. It bore years of displacement, and it was full of hundreds of thousands of civilians displaced in previous waves of violence in Darfur. It was besieged during a period of eighteen months which was characterized by the United Nations in the most humanitarian terms. And the particular place that led the AU to the most direct institutional accountability response, the May 2024 PSC mandate to have the crimes committed there investigated by the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights. All these aspects alone explain why El Fasher is of interest. They collectively transform it into the most analytically fruitful single site to study how the commitments of the peace and security of the AU are actually operating in circumstances where there is active atrocity.

The paper does not make an effort to discuss the Sudan conflict in detail. The other places where the war started such as Khartoum, Wad Medani and the other state capitals of Darfur that preceded El Fasher are mentioned where they will give some required context or points of comparison. But they are not the subject of primary analysis. The dynamics of the conflict on the national level, such as the political relationship between the SAF and the RSF and the overall failure of the democratic transition in Sudan are addressed where they directly influence what transpired in El Fasher, but never as an end in and of themselves. It is this rigorous

geographical attention that enables the study to transcend the description of the wider institution and provide the type of evidence-based intensive analysis that the larger studies of the AU engagement in Sudan are yet to offer.

1.8.2 Content Scope

The subject matter of this paper is narrowed down to institutional response of the African Union to the civil war in Sudan, where El Fasher is the main prism in which the African Union response is discussed. The study has four areas of scope.

First, the paper examines the formal institutional reactions of the AU to the conflict, such as Peace and Security Council communiqués, statements and declarations by the Chairperson of the AU Commission, and the efforts of the High-Level Panel on Sudan that was instituted in early 2024. These are considered to be the main manifestations of the political activity of the AU on the crisis.

Second, the paper discusses the mandate issued to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in May 2024 to probe alleged crimes against humanity in El Fasher. This covers the Commission ruling to hold a Virtual Joint Fact-Finding Mission, the limitations it faced and the overall inquiries its history puts on the accountability construction of the AU.

Third, the paper takes into account the connection between the mediation work of the AU and that of other processes that are currently at work, especially, the Jeddah Process, co-convened by the United States and Saudi Arabia, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development. This does not hang along the argument of the study. The structural factors that have contributed to the limited role of the AU in the conflict include fragmentation across these competing tracks, and how they interrelate is critical to the evaluation of the effectiveness of the AU.

Fourth, the paper looks at the internal and external limitations that have influenced the performance of the AU, namely, the enforcement deficit, the legitimacy trap caused by the suspended membership of Sudan, and the reported external interference of the United Arab Emirates in favor of the RSF.

There are a number of spheres that are beyond this and those are not random. The paper fails to provide a comprehensive military examination of the war, the movements of troops, the dynamics of the battlefield, and the development of tactics are mentioned only in those cases when it is needed to place an institutional response of the AU in context. It fails to give a full evaluation of the humanitarian situation in Sudan other than what is necessary to assess the civilian protection track record of the AU in El Fasher. The functions of the United Nations, individual member states and other international actors are addressed where they directly overlap with the decision-making of the AU, but are not addressed as subjects of primary analysis per se. Such exclusions are a sign of the methodological decision to maintain the analytical focus narrow instead of wide, depth over breadth, in a study where depth is most needed by the existing literature.

1.8.3 Time Scope

This research will be conducted between April 2023 and February 2026, the date when the civil war is ongoing and the date that this study was done, respectively. This spectrum reflects the entire spectrum of the conflict up to this point, such as the intensification of the conflict in El Fasher, the institutional reactions of the AU, and the last PSC interventions on the crisis.

Four moments are the focus of specific analysis in this period due to their importance to both the situation in El Fasher and the institutional reaction of the AU.

The time when El Fasher first attracted particular and immediate attention on the part of the AU is December 2023. An assault on the Abu Shok displacement camp where Darfurian civilians had been living more than 20 years was the first public declaration of alarm by the chairperson of the AU Commission Moussa Faki Mahamat, a move indicating the beginnings of institutional acknowledgement that El Fasher was turning into a hot spot.

The most notable institutional increase in the response of the AU is May to June 2024. The Peace and Security Council officially authorized the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to probe into alleged crimes against humanity in El Fasher and other regions of Darfur, and the Commission then decided to engage in

a Virtual Joint Fact-Finding Mission in response to the mandate. This is the time when the AU shifted, at least in theory, away to political condemnation to active mechanisms of accountability.

The worst point in the time of the study is October 2025. RSF troops occupied El Fasher and there were reports of mass killings and summary executions of civilians including patients in a maternity hospital. The Chairperson of the AU Commission, Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, came out with a public statement condemning the atrocities and the Peace and Security Council urged the identification of external actors fueling the conflict. This scene distills the main conflict of the whole dissertation, utmost institutional rhetoric, at the very point of utmost institutional failure.

The study will end at February 2026, which will reflect the latest state of the engagement of the AU, with the latest PSC communiqués and the open nature of the ACHPR investigation. This is where this research derives its conclusions.

The history of conflict in Darfur before 2023 is not a major topic of the study. The background sections rely on that history, especially the genocide of the early 2000s, the deployment of the AMIS and the time of the UNAMID to answer the question why El Fasher has the weight it does. On the other side of the coin, the research does not even strive to guess the development of the conflict after the year 2026 in February. The suggestions provided in Chapter Five, however, are based on the evidence compiled during this time and are meant to be practically applicable to future involvement of the AU, thus the analysis itself is limited in historical terms, but its implications are explicitly futuristic.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction.

This chapter examines and summarizes the literature available on the issue of the African Union response to the Sudan civil war with specific regard to El Fasher in North Darfur. The review is structured in terms of five thematic areas, which directly relate to each of the five research questions that inform this study. Each theme is introduced in the chapter with the main concepts determined, the literature reviewed on the topic and the gap that is being filled by the dissertation. The chapter relies on the work in conflict resolution, theory of regional integration, international humanitarian law, and African studies of peace and security. A literature review is more than a summary of what is known, as Creswell and Poth (2018) note, a well-constructed literature review shows exactly where new investigation is necessary and why.

2.1 The Peace and Security Mechanisms of the AU and how they were applied in El Fasher.

It is important to define what is meant by a peace and security mechanism before evaluating the response of the AU to the conflict in Sudan. The term is used to mean in general the institutional arrangements, normative systems, and procedural means by which a regional organization employs to avert, contain, or remedy armed conflict (Dung et al., 2024). These mechanisms are more or less organized within the African Peace and Security Architecture, APSA, adopted in 2002 and established through a series of protocols and decisions within the framework of the AU (Bah, 2008). APSA was set to be a system that is integrated and has five interconnected elements: a political decision making body, an early warning mechanism to identify developing crises, a military force that is deployed quickly, a panel of senior mediators and a special fund that can be used to fund peace operations. The combination of these was to provide the AU with the institutional acumen, as well as the operational capability to act upon conflicts before they got out of control (African Union, 2002).

The most important of them is Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act of the AU that gives the organisation the right to interfere in the member states where there are war crimes, genocide or other crimes against humanity (Bah, 2009). This was a strategic and serious break with the original doctrine of the Organisation of African Unity of non-interference, which had in the past assumed state sovereignty to be sacrosanct no matter what occurred within the borders of a state (Kent Academic Repository, 2019). The question of whether the AU has fulfilled this normative commitment in practice, especially in El Fasher, where the circumstances leading to the application of Article 4(h) were evident, is one of the key questions that this dissertation explores.

2.1.1 Empirical Review

The academic experience of APSA in Sudan has been marked by the practice of an unbridgeable disjuncture between institutional design and the reality of operation. Dung, Umar, Adamu, and Musa (2024) performed a qualitative evaluation of the conflict management at AU in Darfur based on the interviews with twenty-four key informants. Their results show that the AU has always considered political mediation and peace keeping as distinct practices, instead of a combined conflict management approach which has undermined both. The first large-scale experiment of this method was AMIS, which was used in 2004-2007. According to Bah (2008), AMIS was also crippled by a poorly defined mandate, lack of sufficient troops and chronic underfunding, which resulted in its inability to defend civilians on the scale of the situation required.

The Sudan crisis saw the activation of a number of APSA instruments by the AU in response to the crisis in 2023. They involved the creation of a High-Level Panel on Sudan at the beginning of 2024, a set of PSC communiqués insisting on ceasefires and humanitarian access, and the official mandate of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to investigate atrocities in El Fasher (Biegon, 2024). Never however was the most important APSA instrument, the African Standby Force, invoked. According to Minko (2025), over 20 years after the adoption of APSA, the ASF has yet to be operationally deployed in any one mission. He blames this failure on political differences between the AU and its Regional Economic Communities on issues of command and authority, and unresolved logistical and

doctrinal challenges (ACCORD, 2025). This is no side remark, it is that the one APSA tool which was specifically created to be used in a situation such as El Fasher has never worked as intended.

The latest addition to this literature is an article by Ani (2026) who claims that the lack of collective political will is the root of the problem in the AU, rather than institutional design. Using interviews with officials of the AU, Ani discovers that member states regularly do not assist the AU in its initiatives when this contradicts their bilateral interests, a trend that is especially apparent in the case of Sudan, where regional powers have conflicting economic and political interests in the outcome of the conflict (ISS Africa, 2026). In the absence of that political support, even the most well-thought-out APSA mechanisms are deprived of their validity and impact.

The current literature is a valuable set of institutional descriptions of the design of APSA and its initial uses, but the majority of these works date back to before the conflict in April 2023 (Bah, 2008, 2009) or investigate the Sudan engagement of the AU at the national level without considering how a particular set of mechanisms was operationalized in a specific place (Dung et al., 2024). The literature is yet to be systematically discussed after 2023, and there is virtually no scholarly analysis of the institutional dynamics, the PSC mandate, the ACHPR referral, the condemnation of the AU Chairperson, that characterize the AU role in El Fasher after 2023. This dissertation fills this gap.

2.2 The effectiveness of the AU in measuring the situation will be determined.

To determine whether the AU has been effective or not, it is important to first define the meaning of effectiveness in this context. Conflict resolution scholarship does not consider effectiveness as a yes-no question. Diehl and Druckman (2010) suggest a multi-dimensional concept whereby peacekeeping performance is assessed on a number of different sub-dimensions: containing armed violence, reducing civilian suffering and promoting political settlements. Most importantly, they state that effectiveness should never be evaluated against some external or ideal standard but against the particular mandate and the set objectives of the intervening actor.

This research conceptualises the effectiveness in terms of four areas that directly align with the self-proclaimed goals of the AU in Sudan: compliance with ceasefire, protection of civilians, humanitarian access, and accountability of alleged atrocities. The combination of analyzing the performance of the AU in all four dimensions and not in any single dimension is what sets the analytical approach of this study apart in comparison with much of the current literature (Ani, 2026).

The track record of the AU on compliance with ceasefire is always disheartening. In May 2023, the Jeddah Process resulted in a short-lived ceasefire agreement, which failed almost instantly, which confirms that negotiated ceasefires are of little use without enforcement mechanisms (Ani, 2026). Later attempts by PSC to call hostilities were disregarded by the SAF and the RSF (AllAfrica, 2025). The ripeness theory described by Zartman (2000) can be used to understand this trend: the parties in a conflict will not take a serious approach to negotiation until they realize that the cost of further fighting will be greater than the possible benefits. As the RSF was getting external military assistance and it felt that it was capable of winning the military, the ceasefire demands by the AU meant nothing.

The most obvious and crippling defeat is on civilian protection, the eighteen months siege of El Fasher. The United Nations reports told about the situation in the besieged city in the most harsh words, methodical fire at residential districts, air attacks on hospitals, and the active prevention of humanitarian convoy (ICRC, 2025). By October 2025, when El Fasher was taken over, more than a million people had fled and about 260,000 were stuck with no credible access to food or medication (AOHR, 2025). The normative obligation of the AU towards civilian protection under Article 4(h) of its Constitutive Act resulted in no protective deployment, no enforcement intervention and no effective obstacle to what was going on in the ground (Russo, 2024).

Regarding humanitarian access, Russo (2024) states that the AU might have been in a better place to leverage Khartoum politically than the UN, since it had a history of engagement via UNAMID, but that such comparative advantage was never converted into actual pressure to open access pathways. Humanitarian reports by the International Committee of the Red Cross have confirmed that humanitarian

convoy to El Fasher was periodically blocked or shot during the year 2024 and 2025 (ICRC, 2025).

Regarding accountability, the October 2025 statement by the Chairperson of the AU Commission denouncing alleged war crimes was noteworthy as a rhetorical measure, but has not had any practical impact on the perpetrators. Ani (2026) notes the significant fact that neither the SAF nor the RSF have seen any enforcement of an AU pronouncement in decades, and have logically concluded that the organisation cannot take any significant action. Once lost in this manner credibility can not be regained with one vigorously phrased word.

Available literature on the effectiveness of the AU in Darfur, I believe that it is more biased towards the AMIS and UNAMID periods. Between 2004 and 2020. Leaving the conflict after 2023 mostly unexplored (Dung et al., 2024; Bah, 2008). In essence, no one has examined the recent war.

This is what I found to be shocking when I read, There is also a striking lack of studies that evaluate the effectiveness of the AU on a multi-sub-dimension basis. The majority of work, they deal with either mediation or peacekeeping deployment. But not the interaction of ceasefire diplomacy, civilian protection and accountability in one case. It is as though people are only gazing at a single piece of the puzzle.

I believe that this dissertation uses the multi-dimensional framework on El Fasher. In each of the four dimensions. All four. Sealing the gap in time, as well as the gap in analysis. Both.

To demonstrate that you can look at everything together. To demonstrate what the AU did or did not do. To narrow down on El Fasher not general trends. Use an improved approach. Use it to get practical solutions.

Another shocking thing that I read is that the majority of studies merely go up to 2020. Frankly speaking, that way they miss the worst of the conflict. This is why my research is important.

2.3 The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights as an Accountability Mechanism

The African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights is the main human rights institution of the AU that was created in 1981 based on the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Its mandate is based on three fundamental activities; the promotion and protection of human rights in the continent, the reception of communications by individuals and states accusing of violation and fact-finding missions in cases of grave human rights concern (Viljoen, 2012). A significant difference between the promotional and the standard-setting role of the Commission and its educational and capacity-building role and its protective role, which entails inquiry of alleged violations and the prescribing of remedial action, is made by Viljoen. The most directly applicable role to the Commission involvement on El Fasher is the role of protection.

The term accountability as it is applied to international law and human rights literature describes the means by which individuals and institutions can be held responsible to violations of legal norms, either by criminal prosecution, administrative penalty, or by offering redress to victims (International Crisis Group, 2025). The fact-finding role of the Commission makes it a quasi-judicial accountability agent: it is able to document atrocities, determine the culprits, and present recommendations to the political organs of the AU on subsequent measures. It cannot do what it cannot and this is a structural constraint that influences all the aspects of its functioning in active conflict settings.

This tension is acutely demonstrated by the involvement of the Commission with El Fasher. As the PSC ordered it to probe atrocities in the city in May 2024, the Commission was instantly hit by the most basic limitation of all, it could not gain physical access to the conflict area. This prompted it to create a Virtual Joint Fact-Finding Mission, which, between June 2024 and March 2025, consisted of remote interviews of victims, witnesses, and refugees in neighbouring countries. This was an improvisational and in a way creative solution to an unprecedentedly challenging access issue. By definition it was also restricted. The remoteness of testimony cannot be used in place of physical examination of the scenes of crime,

mass graves, or demolished civilian infrastructure, the type of evidence that forms the basis of most plausible accountability processes.

The scholarly literature on the ACHPR is strong in its discussion of the normative framework that the Commission has but much weaker in its discussion on how the Commission functions in an active conflict context. The most detailed scholarly treatment of the Commission to date by Viljoen (2012) concedes that the Commission has come up with complex normative standards in the various areas of human rights, but its implementation instruments are structurally feeble. Commission is only able to make findings and make recommendations but lacks any independent enforcement power and relies solely on the political goodwill of the member states of the AU to implement its findings.

Biegon (2024) suggests that the May 2024 PSC mandate may be a potentially historic point in the accountability reaction of the AU to the Darfur crisis, the Commission would be able to investigate the crisis, which could be the turning point in the long history of impunity in the region. Biegon however cushions this judgment by a candid admission of the Commission track record, it undertook a probe into the Tigray war in Ethiopia and never released its findings; it was unable to raise an effective counter to the Libyan crisis. Institutional design issues that gave rise to those failures, part-time membership, chronic under-investment, and complete reliance on state cooperation to provide physical access, are still unaddressed and directly limit the potential success of the El Fasher investigation.

Another layer of complexity is the broadening of the accountability arena. Bah (2009) also discusses the strains that the ICC indictment of al-Bashir on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity in Darfur created, and that most of the member states of the AU saw the prosecution as a hindrance to peace talks and in response, they all declined to execute the arrest warrant. This episode exposes a conflict that has characterized the operating environment of accountability mechanisms in Darfur since: the need to bring perpetrators to justice and the need to sustain the diplomatic relations which are necessary to hold peace talks often conflict with each other, and the latter has always been the priority of the AU.

According to Biegon (2024), El Fasher is indeed uncharted territory of the ACHPR. Literature on how the Commission has gone about this particular investigation, what access limitations it has faced, what the Virtual Joint Fact-Finding Mission has actually delivered, or whether its results will create any value accountability, is virtually nonexistent. This dissertation helps to fill that gap by placing the El Fasher mandate of the Commission in the context of the overall accountability structure of the AU and by evaluating the structural conditions that most likely will dictate whether the investigation will have enduring consequences.

2.4 Internal and External Factors that impact the AU Effectiveness.

The institutional design of any regional organization is only one of the determinants of its success in conflict management, but it is the interaction of internal and external factors that make or limit its ability to do so. In this context, internal factors refer to structural, political and normative processes that start within the institutional borders of the AU, or between its member states. External factors refer to the forces that exist beyond the institutional structure in the AU that influence the ability to act, such as the actions of third parties, larger geopolitical, and the actions of other multilateral actors (Dung et al., 2024).

There are two theoretical frameworks that are useful in analyzing these dynamics. Keohane (1984) neoliberal institutionalism believes that international institutions influence the behaviour of states by lowering transaction costs and providing credible commitment amongst members. In the case of the AU, this implies that the internal rules, norms and decision making processes of the organisation should in principle raise the chances of the member states complying with the institutional decisions. Once the legitimacy or norms are challenged or not enforced, the overall performance of the organisation suffers due to the weakening of those internal mechanisms. To this end, Amare (2025) notion of the institutional legitimacy deficit suggests that when an organisation is seen to lack either the political power or the moral authority to do something, neither member states nor conflict parties are more receptive to its decision-making, even where the decisions made have formal legal force.

Stedman (1997) concept of the conflict spoiler is directly applicable on the outside. Spoilers are actors, who feel that a peace settlement endangers their interests and thus they actively seek to derail the peace process. The military assistance, which the United Arab Emirates has been reported to have offered to the RSF, such as the provision of drones with weapons and the utilization of the Chadian soil as a logistical hub, perfectly fits this definition. The UAE was able to maintain the military potential of the RSF thereby minimizing the stress on the RSF to take the ceasefire or mediation process undertaken by the AU seriously.

The most analytically important of the internal constraints is the legitimacy trap that Sudan has brought about through its suspended membership in the AU. The paradox is clear as Amare (2025) indicates that the suspension was effected by the unconstitutionality of the military coup, yet the negotiations that now have to be conducted by the AU are with the same actors whose unconstitutional behavior led to the suspension. Such actors have learnt to take advantage of the gray area, and will participate in the processes of the AU when it suits them, and reject the authority of the AU when it does not. The outcome is that the institutional advantage of the organisation over the SAF as well as the RSF in El Fasher has been drastically reduced.

According to Ani (2026), the lack of collective political will is the most determining internal factor. His study, which is founded on the interviews with the officials of the AU, indicates that the member states often fail to offer support to the initiatives of the AU when they are inconsistent with the bilateral economic or political interests they have in Sudan. This trend has had tangible effects, PSC communiqués have been diluted at the altar, contributions to the peace operations of the AU have been less than what is required and member states have embarked on different mediation routes that would benefit their respective strategic interests rather than serve as a complementary unit to the overall direction of the AU. Minko (2025) adds that after over 20 years, the African Standby Force is still not deployed simply because member states cannot come to an agreement on the command arrangements that would govern the use of the force and that the AU has no viable military deterrence option in case of a situation such as El Fasher.

The role of the UAE on the external side has gained more and more attention in the policy and academic circles. In October of 2025, the PSC communication clearly mentioned that there was credible evidence of UAE military support to the RSF, such as armed drones and weapons being channeled through Chadian airspace (ISS Africa, 2026). This foreign military aid essentially transformed the military scenario in Darfur where the RSF was able to maintain an eighteen-month siege of El Fasher against the recurrent calls of a ceasefire by the AU. The ripeness theory by Zartman (2000) can be used to explain why this happened: a conflict party that feels that external support provides it with a route to a military victory will not take the process of external mediation seriously no matter how authoritative the mediating institution may think itself to be. To make matters worse, the decentralization of mediation between the High-Level panel of the AU, the Jeddah Process and IGAD led to what Dung et al. (2024) refer to as mediation fragmentation, a scenario where the warring parties are free to choose which track is the most beneficial to their immediate tactical goals, and not be constrained by the logic or the momentum of a single process.

The available literature provides the broad types of internal and external constraint of the AU effectiveness without break-down to the interaction of these factors with each other in the context of the post-2023 Sudan conflict. Although the issue of the UAE as a conflict spoiler is becoming more and more popular in the policy circles, it has not been explored academically with respect to its direct impact on the mediation of El Fasher by the AU. On the same note, the nexus between the suspended membership of Sudan and the capability of the AU to meaningfully interact with the two warring sides has been identified but not addressed at the case study level. This dissertation fills both gaps by following through documentary evidence how the response of the AU to the El Fasher crisis in 2023-2026 was influenced by certain internal and external factors.

2.5 Empowering the AU Conflict Management and Peacebuilding Capacity.

The fifth theme deals with the prescriptive aspect of the literature, what scholars and policy institutions have suggested to transform the AU into a better institution to handle conflicts and establish sustainable peace. The original meaning of peacebuilding as Boutros-Ghali (1992) defined it in the Agenda for Peace of the UN

is to recognize and strengthen the institutions that are most likely to deter the re-occurrence of a conflict. It includes short-term intervention, ceasefire observation, disarmament, and more structural interventions, including institutional reform and transitional justice. Conflict management in the more limited sense of the word as defined by Zartman (2000) is the ability to hold active hostilities in check by diplomatic or political means or by the use of coercion.

The main idea in this theme is institutional reform as a tool to enhance the effectiveness of the AU. Reform-oriented scholarship provides a handy differentiation between procedural reforms, which concern a change in the rules of decision making, or the mechanisms of enforcement or mobilisation of resources, and normative reforms, which concern a reevaluation of the principles upon which institutional behaviour is based (Bah, 2009). Both of these are applicable to the case of the AU in Sudan. The principle of subsidiarity in the relations between the EU and the UN is also important. In this sense of subsidiarity, writes Russo (2024), the regional organisations must do the leading in regional responses to conflict, with the United Nations merely supporting and not dictating. Enhancing this relationship, to the point where it generates complementary and not redundant or competitive relationship, is cited in the literature as one of the most significant structural transformations that can be implemented to increase the level of success of conflict management in Africa.

According to Bah (2009), the most pressing structural reform that the AU can get is the full operationalization of the African Standby Force. This will involve addressing the command-and-control tensions between the AU and its Regional Economic Communities, developing a long-lasting logistics platform, and developing a reliable and foreseeable source of funds by developing the AU Peace Fund. The ASF cannot be deployed at the time when it is most needed without these changes, and as it has been in the last two decades, the ASF is a paper institution that cannot be enacted when it is most needed.

Russo (2024) pays attention to the coordination relationship between the United Nations and the AU. She suggests a formalised division of labour whereby the AU is assigned the main role of political mediation and ceasefire diplomacy where its comparative advantage with regional actors is highest and the UN is left with the

role of responding to humanitarian needs and any peacekeeping operation that is beyond the capacity of the AU. She further states that the AU should have a more autonomous and reliable source of funding, pointing out that its reliance on EU funding at the moment constitutes the structural conflict of interest that may undermine its credibility as the neutral mediator.

The most detailed reform agenda in the recent literature is provided by Ani (2026) who covers the institutional and political aspects. He urges the AU to bring together their divided Sudan engagement in a single coherent approach that will integrate the AU Roadmap, the High-Level Panel and PSC engagement in a single track, which causes the warring parties to play the various processes off one another. He further suggests that the AU should hold a special regional conference on Sudan, which should include the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other external parties with the express purpose of coming up with a common framework of curbing foreign interference. Regarding accountability in particular, Biegon (2024) suggests the ACHPR receive full-time professional staff, stable independent funding, and procedural timelines to publish findings of investigations, which would serve to address the institutional failure that resulted in the non-publication of the Tigray report and would provide the Commission with a realistic opportunity to generate actionable accountability in El Fasher.

The prescriptive literature on institutional reform of the AU is fairly well advanced at the stage of general structural recommendation, but is always out of touch with the experience of particular recent crises. Proposals to operationalize ASF and reform Peace Fund are long-standing, yet they are seldom based on an analysis of how the particular gaps influenced the outcome in a specific conflict. Almost total lack of scholarship that specifically draws on the El Fasher experience to come up with evidence-based reform recommendations is also present. El Fasher crisis is the most severe challenge of the capacity of the AU conflict management since Darfur genocide of the early 2000s, but has not been systematically utilized in the prescriptive literature. This dissertation fills that gap, each suggestion made in Chapter Five is based upon the particular evidence at El Fasher, and not on generic institutional logic, so the prescriptions will be commensurate to the actual failures that the crisis indicated.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction.

This chapter established the approach that was followed in this study. It clarified the research design that was used, reasons why El Fasher was used as the geographical focus, details the sources of data and data collection methods, details how the data was analysed, quality and error control, and considers the ethical aspects of studying a conflict of this scale. All these decisions are intentional and related to the main purpose of the research to create a rigorous, evidence-based evaluation of the institutional reaction of the African Union to the civil war in Sudan, in particular, in El Fasher.

3.1 Research Design

In this research, the research design is qualitative; that is, a single case study design on El Fasher in Darfur region of Sudan. Qualitative research is best suited when a research study aims to comprehend meaning, context and process, as opposed to measuring or quantifying phenomena, and this dissertation is fundamentally concerned with how and why the institutional responses of the AU took the form that they did, and what impact they had on the ground (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

The case study design is justified based on the grounds that Flyvbjerg (2011) refers to the power of the example. One, carefully selected case can provide the depth of analysis that wider comparative research cannot, especially when the case is strategically important and well-documented. El Fasher fits the two conditions. It became the centre of the most direct institutional accountability reaction of the AU, the May 2024 ACHPR mandate, and it was the location of some of the worst and most reported atrocities of the conflict. According to George and Bennett (2005), single case studies are especially useful in following the causal interrelationships between the decision-making and outcomes in institutions. This work focuses on El Fasher to explore exactly that relationship: how institutional decisions and inaction of the AU influenced the events that occurred to the civilians in the city in 2023-2025.

3.2 The area of the study

This research paper has a geographical scope of the city of El Fasher, the capital of the North Darfur state in the Republic of Sudan, which is some 802 kilometres west of Khartoum. The city has a long history of being the administrative and business centre of Darfur region and according to Flint and de Waal (2008), it has a rich historical background as the Sultanate of Darfur and a historic trade and governance centre in the western Sudan.

El Fasher is chosen as the place of study due to both institutional and analytical reasons. The location is institutionally the one to elicit the most direct and specific response of the AU in the ongoing conflict, such as the May 2024 PSC mandate directing the ACHPR to investigate atrocities there (Biegon, 2024), and the October 2025 public condemnation by the chairperson of the AU Commission specifically mentioning El Fasher and demanding accountability (RFI, 2025). Analytically, by studying one city, this study is able to trace the relationship between the decisions made by the AU institutions and their on-the-ground implications in a way that a broader geographical area would not have allowed. The selection of El Fasher is not a study constraint, but a design choice that will help the analysis be more focused, and more responsible to the evidence.

3.3 Sources of Data

This paper is based solely on secondary data. No research was done using human subjects. According to Kothari (2013), secondary data is a body of information collected and documented in the past with the intention of being used in other research but can be systematically analyzed to answer new research questions.

The secondary sources of this research can be divided into four categories. To begin with, the official documents of the AU, such as PSC communiqués, statements of the AU Commission, the AU Roadmap to Sudan, and ACHPR documentation, which will be the main evidence of what the AU did and said at the time of the study. Second, United Nations reports and resolutions, which offer independent reporting of the situation in El Fasher and the entire conflict. Third, academic literature on the peace and security architecture of the AU, conflict resolution theory, and the ACHPR that has been peer reviewed. Fourth, authoritative policy reports issued by organizations such as the Institute for

Security Studies, the International Crisis Group and the International Committee of the Red Cross which offer both an analytical framing and operational evidence of what is going on the ground.

3.4 Sampling Approach

Since it is a document-based study, sampling is defined as the choice of documents and not human subjects. The sampling method is purposive, documents were chosen according to their direct relation to the research questions and the ability to give detailed information about the institutional response of the AU to the El Fasher crisis that is credible (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling would be ideal in case study research where the objective is analytical thoroughness and not statistical representativeness. To be included in the study, a document had to satisfy at least three of four quality criteria, be relevant to at least one of the research questions, have the credibility of the source, have been published during the time frame of the study where applicable, and be corroborated by at least one independent source.

3.5 Research Instrument

The main analytical tool of the study is a document analysis protocol which was created according to Bowen (2009) protocol of qualitative document analysis. The protocol offers a systematic way of deriving the information of each source that is deemed to be relevant in a consistent and reproducible way. On every document read, the protocol notes the source, date and type of document, research question or questions it answers, the major arguments or findings it makes, the specific evidence it offers and any limitations or possible biases that the authors have recognized.

The document analysis protocol addresses five issues, it makes the data extraction process systematic and consistent across all sources, it helps to focus the analysis on research-relevant information and not on interesting but peripheral material, it allows revealing the implicit meanings hidden in institutional language, it allows triangulation since it is possible to compare findings across several sources, and it provides an audit trail that helps to demonstrate the transparency and confirmability of the research process.

3.6 Data Collection

The process of document collection was four stages. The search commenced with systematic searching of official repositories, such as the institutional site of the AU, the online archive of the Peace and Security Council, as well as the documentation centre of ACHPR, using such search terms as Sudan, El Fasher, Darfur, ceasefire, APSA, and accountability. The search was restricted to the time frame April 2023 to February 2026 which is within the time of the study.

The second phase was repository mining, which included following reference lists and citations in the documents collected to determine other relevant sources. Bowen (2009) states that this snowball technique of identifying documents can be especially useful when trying to find documents that might not be easily found using standard database searches, such as grey literature and institutional reports that are not commonly indexed.

The third step entailed trying to get access to documents that were not in the public domain. Where it was found that there were relevant documents but restricted, formal requests were made via relevant channels, and a declaration of research purpose and commitment to treat any materials provided in compliance with ethical research standards.

Organisation and storage was the fourth stage. All of the gathered documents were organized in a digital system of structured files where each source received an ID and was defined according to metadata, such as the type of source, its date, the issuing institution, and the research question(s) that it responds to. This orderly arrangement streamlined the following analysis procedure to be more manageable and traceable.

3.6.1 Timeline

This study was done in the period between October 2025 and January 2026, a three-month time period that enabled comprehensive data collection in terms of document collection and systematic analysis. This timeline was intended to reflect the most notable recent events in the conflict such as the fall of El Fasher in October 2025 and the immediate institutional reaction of the AU but give time to thoroughly analyze it before the deadline of submission in February 2026.

3.7 Quality and Error Control.

Qualitative research is evaluated differently as compared to quantitative research. Qualitative research is compared with the criteria of credibility, dependability and confirmability rather than reliability and validity in the statistical sense by the frameworks suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Triangulation helped to increase credibility, the belief that the findings reflect the institutional realities under investigation: in every case possible, the assertions regarding the conduct or conditions in El Fasher are backed by at least two independent sources. The official documents of the AU are compared to the UN reports, academic literature and reliable policy publication to determine consistency or inconsistency.

The document analysis protocol helps to support the dependability, the consistency and transparency of the research process, as every source is processed in the same systematic manner irrespective of its content and conclusions. Any analytical decision such as the decision not to include sources that failed to satisfy the quality criteria are all traceable.

Confirmability, how the results are representative of the evidence and not the assumptions of the researcher, is covered by the protocol used to conduct the literature review which is recorded in the appendix and provides enough detail of the search strategy, inclusion criteria and synthesis approach that the process can be audited by an independent party.

3.8 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze data in this research based on the guidelines of qualitative document analysis as outlined by Bowen (2009) and the thematic synthesis methodology as presented by Braun and Clarke (2006). Following the analysis protocol, after every document was analyzed, the findings were themed in relation to the five research questions. In each theme, the analysis was carried out in three steps, initially determining what the conceptual and theoretical literature dictates regarding the essential concepts at issue; secondly, determining what the empirical literature and primary documents say regarding the actual performance of the AU; and lastly, determining convergences, contradictions, and gaps among the sources.

Convergent findings are given where there was consensus among the sources as the prevailing evidential stance. Where the sources were in conflict, such as whether institutional design or the political environment is the major reason behind the ineffectiveness of the AU, both sides of the argument are both given and put in context rather than one being eliminated. This is the spirit of analytical honesty which qualitative research must possess, and it will make sure that the conclusions made in Chapter Five are based on the entire richness of the evidence, and not on a selective interpretation of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

4.0 Introduction.

This chapter reports on the results of a systematic review of existing secondary sources, such as official reports issued by the UN and the Peace and Security Council, reports by the ACHPR, peer-reviewed scholarly articles and reliable policy publications and is structured according to the five research questions that form the basis of this study. In all five spheres of analysis, the data leads to a similar and disturbing conclusion the institutional reaction of the African Union to the crisis in El Fasher has been typified by both authentic action and virtually no protective effect. The AU responded. It gave communiques, formed panels, required investigations, and denounced atrocities. What it failed to do was prevent the siege, safeguard civilians, ensure humanitarian access and hold anyone responsible. To know why this is necessary is to consider not only what the AU did, but the structural, political and external circumstances that defined what actually the actions of the UN were able to achieve.

Table 4.0.1: Overview of Significant Civil War Conflicts in El Fasher, Darfur Region (2003-2025)

Date / Period	Conflict / Event	Primary Cause	AU Effort	Key Actor(s)
2003-2007	Darfur Genocide & Janjaweed Campaign	Counter-insurgency against SLA and JEM rebel groups; ethnic marginalisation of non-Arab communities	Deployed AU Mission in Sudan (AMIS, 2004-2007); facilitated Abuja Peace Agreement (2006)	GoS/Janjaweed vs. SLA, JEM; AU Commission

Date / Period	Conflict / Event	Primary Cause	AU Effort	Key Actor(s)
2007-2020	Continued Darfur Insurgency under UNAMID	Unresolved land disputes, ethnic tensions, failure to implement Abuja Agreement	Transitioned AMIS to UNAMID (AU-UN Hybrid); peace negotiations in Doha leading to DDPD (2011)	SAF, JEM, SLA factions; UNAMID; UN Security Council
Oct 2021	Military Coup & AU Suspension of Sudan	SAF and RSF jointly ousted civilian transitional government; breakdown of democratic transition	Suspended Sudan's AU membership; called for restoration of civilian rule; engaged in mediation	SAF (al-Burhan), RSF (Hemedti); AU PSC
Apr 2023 - present	Sudan Civil War - outbreak of SAF-RSF armed conflict	Power struggle over RSF integration into SAF; competition for economic resources and political authority	Adopted AU Roadmap; established High-Level Panel on Sudan (2024); issued multiple PSC communiqués demanding ceasefire	SAF (al-Burhan), RSF (Hemedti); AU Commission Chairperson; UAE (external)
Jan 2024 - Oct 2025	18-Month Siege of El Fasher	RSF strategic objective to	May 2024: PSC mandated	RSF; SAF; ACHPR; AU PSC; UN; ICRC

Date / Period	Conflict / Event	Primary Cause	AU Effort	Key Actor(s)
Oct 2025	Fall of El Fasher & Mass Atrocities	capture last SAF-held Darfur state capital; ethnic targeting of non-Arab communities	ACHPR investigation of El Fasher atrocities; AU Chairperson issued condemnations; called for humanitarian access	RSF; AU Commission; PSC; international community
		RSF forces captured El Fasher; reports of mass executions, ethnic killings, attack on Saudi maternity hospital	AU Commission Chairperson Mahmoud Ali Youssouf condemned war crimes; PSC called for identification of external sponsors; rejected military solution	

Source: ICRC reports (2003-2025).

4.1 The AU's Peace and Security Mechanisms and their Application in El Fasher.

The reaction of the AU to the Sudan civil war was mainly directed towards the African Peace and Security architecture, APSA, which is a multi-component institutional structure consisting of the Peace and Security Council, the Continental Early Warning System, the African Standby Force, the Panel of the Wise, and the Peace Fund. Theoretically, APSA provides the institutional capacity by the AU to prevent, contain, and solve armed conflicts within the continent. As a practical matter, implementing these mechanisms to El Fasher showed that there is an ongoing and harmful discrepancy between the promise and the delivery of the architecture.

In 2023, the major APSA responses of the AU were the adoption of the AU Roadmap to the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan, the formation of a High-Level Panel on Sudan at the beginning of 2024, and a sequence of PSC communiqués which demanded immediate ceasefires and unhindered humanitarian access. In May 2024, the PSC seemed to have gone a step further, authoritatively requesting the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to probe atrocities in El Fasher. The combination of the above responses proves that the AU was institutionally involved in the crisis and knew how serious it was. They fail to show that the engagement resulted in protective effects.

The greatest institutional failure in this part is simple, the African Standby Force was not deployed at all. According to the records of Minko (2025), the ASF has never been operationally deployed in any mission despite the fact that it has been more than 20 years since the adoption of APSA. These are structural, unresolved command-and-control wrangles between the AU and its Regional Economic Communities, inability to fund its operations through the AU Peace Fund, and lack of a viable deployment doctrine. The implication to El Fasher is just as simple: all the statements of the AU which required protection of civilians were made without any military threat. Words that lacked the plausible use of force did not bind the RSF and it is evident that the RSF was aware of it.

The question is to determine the extent to which AU performance in El Fasher has been effective.

To evaluate the performance of the AU in El Fasher, it is necessary to evaluate its performance in four dimensions: compliance with ceasefire, protection of civilians, access to humanitarian aid, and accountability. The indications of all four are similar, the promises given by the AU were not reflected in reality on the ground.

With regard to ceasefire compliance, the book is one of failure upon failure. The SAF and the RSF have disregarded the PSC requests to stop fighting on several occasions with impunity. The Jeddah Process, which was facilitated by the United States and Saudi Arabia and had significantly greater international leverage than the UN by itself, brought a short-lived and hastily failed ceasefire in 2023. Zartman (2000) ripeness theory justifies the reason why parties to a conflict will not take any of the opportunities presented by a negotiated settlement seriously until they compute the cost of the ongoing fighting to be higher than the gain that can be made. As the RSF was getting external military assistance and pursuing a strategy which it thought could bring military victory, the ceasefire demands of the AU were not effective, not because they were not well formulated, but because the conditions under which such negotiation makes sense were not present.

The most damning evidence of the failure by the AU operation is on civilian protection, the eighteen months siege of El Fasher. The United Nations reporting termed the situation within the city as disastrous, systematic shelling of residential buildings, air bombing of hospitals and the intentional blockage of food and medical convoys. The siege led to the flight of more than one million people out of the city. By October 2025, some 260,000 individuals were trapped in El Fasher with no dependable food or medicine supply, and over 2,000 unarmed civilians had been reported killed, when El Fasher fell to RSF forces. Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act of the AU clearly gives the organisation the authority to intervene in the event of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Eighteen months in El Fasher those conditions existed. The intervention did not happen.

On humanitarian access, ICRC reports on operations state that aid convoys to El Fasher have been frequently blocked or assaulted in 2024 and 2025 (ICRC, 2025). Contending that the AU, based on its historical experience of working with Sudan via UNAMID, might have enjoyed more political credibility with Khartoum than the UN, Russo (2024) suggests that this could have been a comparative advantage that was never translated into practical pressure to clear access corridors. The leverage that the AU had was not well utilized and the humanitarian impact was high.

Regarding accountability, the statement by the October 2025 of alleged war crimes by the head of the AU Commission Mahmoud Ali Youssouf was relevant as an institutional position. It did not matter much in terms of its outcomes. The noteworthy point made by Ani (2026) is that both the SAF and the RSF have seen decades of a lack of enforcement of the statements of the AU and have been logical about it: they believe that there is no actual cost to condemnation in Addis Ababa. A body whose utterances are regularly disregarded cannot reclaim credibility by more forceful expressions, it can reclaim credibility by demonstrating readiness to act. That demonstration is yet to come.

4.3 The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights as an Accountability Mechanism in El Fasher

One of the most institutionally important decisions of the conflict was the May 2024 PSC mandate to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to investigate atrocities in El Fasher. With the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981), the Commission is supposed to facilitate and safeguard human rights, accept communications claiming violations, and undertake fact-finding in cases of grave concern. The El Fasher mandate engaged the Commission in a protective role in an environment of active, recorded atrocity, and in a place where the PSC itself had already designated as a place of crimes against humanity.

The Commission itself was limited by an access problem which it was not able to address. At the time the mandate was issued, El Fasher was besieged and it was impossible to enter it physically. The Commission acted by creating a Virtual Joint Fact-Finding Mission, which operated between June 2024 and March 2025 and collected testimony and witnessed and displaced individuals in neighbouring countries via remote interviews. It was a true and, in a way, inventive response to an access limitation never before known. It also, by definition, was narrow in

terms of evidentiary scope. Remote testimony will never be able to replace in-person examination of crime scenes, destroyed civilian infrastructure, or mass graves, the types of physical evidence that usually form the basis of the most plausible international accountability processes.

In addition to the access issue, Biegon (2024) points out two structural flaws that exacerbate the challenges faced by the Commission. The first is institutional design: the Commission has part-time membership, unremunerated constantly inadequate resources, and complete reliance on state cooperation to be able to access it at all. They are not momentary deficits, they are characteristics of the structure of the Commission, and they have hampered every inquiry which it has undertaken. The second is track record. The Commission has conducted an enquiry into the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia, which it never released. It was unable to muster any effective response to the Libyan crisis. These precedents are important since they create a trend. A body that has been found not to release the findings of investigations in politically sensitive cases over a long period of time carries a heavy credibility cost when it is assigned one of the most politically sensitive cases to investigate in the continent. It is not just the quality of evidence collected in the El Fasher investigation that would render it actionable accountability, but whether the Commission will be able to overcome the institutional inertia that has characterized its past interactions. on the current evidence, that is by no means a sure thing.

4.4 Internal and External Forces that impacted AU Effectiveness in El Fasher.

The low performance of the AU in El Fasher cannot be attributed to one factor. It is the result of a set of interdependent internal and external constraints which had the effect of diminishing the ability of the organization to act and which, when combined, resulted in a scenario where institutional activity and institutional impact were virtually totally unrelated.

An analytically most important limitation is the legitimacy trap that Amare (2025) points out internally. The suspension of Sudan by the AU after the 2021 coup was an institutional reaction based on principle to an unconstitutional takeover of power. It also produced a paradox that has characterized all further AU interventions in the conflict: the organization has to negotiate with the same

military actors, whose actions have led to the suspension, and the actors have learnt to take advantage of their ambiguous status, interfering with the processes of the AU when it is strategically opportune and disregarding the authority of the latter when it is not. This trend has been witnessed by the SAF and RSF in its reaction to PSC communiques and ceasefire demands.

The second internal limitation is the lack of collective political will within the member states, which Ani (2026) cites as the most determining variable in the effectiveness of the AUs. His work, which is informed by interviews with the officials of the AU, demonstrates that member states habitually refuse to cooperate in the initiatives of the AU when doing so does not fit in their bilateral interests in Sudan. The real-world implications have been direct: PSC communiqués have been undermined by diplomatic pressure, donations to the peace operations of the AU have been less than what operations require, and member states have been doing what conflict scholars term forum shopping, not drawing together around a single approach of the AU.

On the outside, the most disruptive has been the alleged military assistance of the United Arab Emirates to the RSF. The October 2025 communique by the AU PSC cited plausible evidence of the UAE weapons shipments to the RSF, such as armed drones that flew through Chadian airspace (ISS Africa, 2026). This foreign military support changed the military equation in Darfur in a manner that directly compromised the mediation muscle of the UN. Using the framework by Stedman (1997), the UAE can be seen as a typical conflict spoiler, an actor that expected to gain certain benefits in case of an RSF military victory and therefore made calculated actions, which undermined the peace process. There was no real incentive to give in to the demands of the AU ceasefire when an RSF had no doubt that external military assistance would remain a possibility. To make this worse, the growth of rival mediation streams, the High-Level Panel of the AU, the Jeddah Process and IGAD, created what Dung et al. (2024) refer to as mediation fragmentation, where conflict parties could pick and choose which process to engage with based on their immediate tactical interests without being constrained by the logic of one framework over another. The power of the AU was not only

watered down by its own institutional constraints, but also by the very structure of international interaction surrounding the organization.

4.5 Proposals to enhance the Conflict Management and Peacebuilding Capacity of the AU.

The El Fasher evidence suggests five areas, where most urgently needed reform is required. They are not generic institutional prescriptions, and are conclusions made based on the failures that have been identified in this instance.

The most structurally important reform is the complete operationalization of the African Standby Force. The non-deployment of the ASF is the most significant gap in the protective capacity of the AU. Operationalization needs three things that are not present at the moment, as Bah (2009) sets: a permanent logistics base, a sustainable and independent financing system via the AU Peace Fund, and a command-and-control doctrine that will sort out the existing wrangles between the AU and its Regional Economic Communities. Even a smaller ASF deployment would have made the siege strategy of the RSF more complex and provided space to protect civilians, had El Fasher had even a limited ASF deployment. In its absence, the AU was left to talk.

The second one is the AU-UN coordination. Russo (2024) presents an eloquent argument that a formalized division of labour should be adopted whereby the main responsibility of the political mediation should be on the part of the AU, where its comparative advantage with regional actors is the highest, and the UN is involved in the humanitarian response and any peacekeeping operation where resources are not provided by the AU. This is not an offer to have the AU under the UN but complementary, each organization should do what it is best in, in a coordinated manner, not competition. Another suggestion made by Russo is the more autonomous base of the AU funding, which he says is structurally incompatible with the credibility of the AU as an impartial mediator when it relies on European Union funding.

Third, the AU should have a single Sudan policy. Ani (2026) shows clearly that the parallelism of the AU Roadmap, the High-Level Panel, and the PSC as different and even opposing tracks has facilitated forum shopping and diminished the unity of the overall stance of the AU. By bringing these together into one well defined

strategy, which is highly required, the structural vulnerability which the parties to conflict are taking advantage of would be eliminated. Ani further suggests a regional conference on Sudan with the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other foreign actors, an avenue of solving the problem of foreign interference that the AU has hitherto not addressed head on.

Fourth, the ACHPR needs to be restructured in case it is to act as a viable accountability tool. According to Biegon (2024), the minimum conditions are professional staff that can be deployed quickly to conflict situations and full-time, independent funding and the timelines of publication of investigation findings. This refusal to release the Tigray report is not an institutional failure in itself, but is an indicator of structural undercapacity that will yield the same outcome in El Fasher unless it is addressed by the time the investigation is completed.

Fifth and lastly the role of the UAE in the Sudan conflict must be brought into the limelight by the AU. The October 2025 PSC communiqué identified external interference as a problem, an important move, but identifying a problem and solving it are not the same thing. The relative political strength of the AU in the Gulf is very low, yet a regional conference of such a type as Ani (2026) suggests would at least provide a diplomatic framework in which the price of further arm shipment to the RSF might be increased and challenged. The lack of speaking on the outside interference has not made the AU a more suitable mediator. It has rendered the AU less noticeable.

Collectively, these five recommendations represent one underlying diagnosis, which is that the fundamental problem of the AU in El Fasher was not a lack of knowledge of what was going on, and an inactivity of its institutions but rather the lack of political will, finances, and enforcement capacity to bring its normative commitments to protective consequences. The key challenge to the African Union peace and security architecture is to address that gap, in Sudan and in future conflicts.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction

This final chapter sums up the research results and evaluates their implications, to the AU as an organization, to the citizens of El Fasher and Darfur, and to the wider question of whether regional organizations in Africa are capable of delivering on the protection promises they have enshrined in their constitutions. The main research question was to find out the effectiveness of the African Union in responding to the Sudan civil war, especially in El Fasher. The conclusion that this dissertation comes to is painful yet obvious: the AU has been operationally ineffective and institutionally active and the difference between the two has yielded catastrophic results to civilians who had no other institution to resort to.

5.1 Summary of Findings

This paper has discussed the institutional response of the AU to the civil war in Sudan between April 2023 and February 2026 with a specific case study of El Fasher in North Darfur based on five interrelated research questions.

In peace and security mechanisms, it is demonstrated that the AU used a variety of APSA tools, an AU Roadmap on Sudan, a High-Level Panel created in early 2024, several PSC communiqués, and the May 2024 mandate to the ACHPR to investigate atrocities in El Fasher. These are authentic institutional involvement. Nevertheless, the African Standby Force, the single APSA mechanism that was to be used in converting political decisions into defensive deployments was not mobilized. All the responses of the AU were thus rhetorical and not operational and the warring parties were aware of this.

The results are always negative on effectiveness in four dimensions. The SAF and the RSF did not adhere to any of the demands of the ceasefire by the AU at any time during the siege. Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act in which civilian protection was to be implemented was not in force, the eighteen months siege resulted in mass killings, bombing of hospitals and displacement of more than one million people, which all happened in a city that the AU had specifically declared as in need of protection. Access to humanitarian aid was acutely limited during

2024 and 2025, with aid delivery in multiple instances being attacked or sent back. And responsibility, even when the October 2025 denunciation of the AU Commission Chairperson took place, had no quantifiable impact on the wrongdoers.

The Commission was responsive but structurally constrained on ACHPR. It was unable to send its forces to El Fasher to carry out the siege, so it organized a Virtual Joint Fact-Finding Mission between June 2024 and March 2025, collecting witness and victim testimony remotely in neighbouring countries. Although it was an actual innovation in the conditions that were very challenging, it could not replace the actual forensic examination of crime scenes and the destroyed infrastructure. The structural flaws of the Commission, which include part-time membership, systematic under-investment, and a sad history of not releasing reports of completed investigations, especially in the Tigray case, cast serious doubts on whether the El Fasher investigation will result in actionable accountability.

The research found four constraints on internal and external factors which combined to explain the institutional paralysis of the AU. The legitimacy trap that Sudan had suspended its membership had put the AU to negotiate with actors whom it was not formally recognising, and who used that ambiguity to subvert the authority of the AU (Amare, 2025). Lack of collective political will among the member states caused watered-down communiqués, under-funded peace operations, and forum shopping among competing mediation tracks (Ani, 2026). The alleged UAE military reinforcement of the RSF, which involved armed drones that were flown over Chadian airspace, changed the military dynamic in Darfur and diminished RSF sensitivity to any external mediation pressure (ISS Africa, 2026). And this spread of parallel processes, the AU High-Level Panel, the Jeddah Process, and IGAD, dissected international mediation in a manner exploited by conflict parties.

5.2 Conclusion

The net finding of this paper is that the African Union showed a very large and decisive disjuncture between its normative undertakings and its operational ability in El Fasher. The peace and security structure of the AU with its foundations in the

progressive nature of Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act is relatively well constituted. It is not an architectural problem. The root cause of the issue, as Ani (2026) points out, is political will, which, as El Fasher evidence repeatedly confirms, is the problem. The member states always put bilateral interests ahead of collective institutional action and the AU could not implement the decisions which it institutionally had the power to take. Together with the legitimacy trap of the suspended membership of Sudan, the spoiler effect of the external military intervention and the incoherence of a fractured mediation environment, the position of the AU was that it could speak but not act with institutional force.

It would however be wrong to conclude the involvement of the AU to be useless. The ACHPR requirement, the denunciation of the October 2025 by the Chairperson of the AU, and the explicit mention of external interference as a cause of the conflict by PSC are not insignificant institutional actions. They ensured the continued existence of the AU in the normative record of the conflict, established a documentary foundation of future accountability processes and indicated that the organization had not thrown its hands up even in situations where it was not in a position to exercise its duties. That is important but not sufficient. El Fasher and Darfur have had a history of intersecting spurts of violence and impunity of over twenty years. This is not the only failure of the AU to protect them. It is one of the trends that the organization has to face squarely in case it wants to be taken seriously as a continental peace and security institution.

5.3 Recommendations

The subsequent suggestions are based on the local evidence at El Fasher as opposed to generic institutional logic. They are aimed mostly at the African Union but have an implication to the member states and other international partners.

The next step in structural reform is the complete operationalization of the African Standby Force. Over 20 years since APSA was implemented, the ASF is yet to be implemented. The AU needs to overcome the unresolved command-and-control issues between itself and its Regional Economic Communities, develop a stable logistics base and ensure permanent funding via the AU Peace Fund. In the absence of a plausible rapid-deployment capability, all the commitments of the AU

to civilian protection are conditional on the goodwill of conflict parties to abide by them, which, as El Fasher shows, cannot be counted on.

Second, the AU needs to unify its disjointed Sudan policy. The separation and even contradiction of the tracks that the AU Roadmap, the High-Level Panel on Sudan and various PSC communiqués represent has facilitated forum shopping and diminished the level of coherence of the overall AU stance. A coherent approach, with assigned roles, set milestones and accountable implementation would eliminate the structural weakness that the parties to conflict have been capitalizing on and provide the AU with a more believable and coherent mediation presence.

Third, the AU ought to organize a special regional conference on Sudan which would involve the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia and other interested external actors. It should aim at a shared platform of minimizing and eventually abolishing foreign military aids to the belligerent sides. The external interference was declared as an issue in the October 2025 PSC communiqué, which is a significant move. The second thing is to establish a diplomatic architecture that renders the price of further interference visible and politically digestible by the parties concerned.

Fourth, the ACHPR needs to be significantly reformed in order to be used as a real accountability mechanism as opposed to a symbolic one. This would involve transferring the Commission to full time professional staff which can be deployed very quickly to conflict zones, providing stable and independent funding that is not reliant on the political goodwill of member states and developing clear procedural schedules of when findings of the investigation would be published. The fact that the report on the Tigray was not published is not a precedent that can be accepted. In case the El Fasher investigation is fulfilled and the results are not released, the credibility of the Commission as an accountability institution will be virtually ended.

Fifth, the AU needs to strategically and intentionally leverage its comparative political advantage with Khartoum to gain access to the populations at risk in a humanitarian manner. Russo (2024) makes a strong case that the history of the the AU in Sudan via UNAMID provides it with some level of political familiarity with

Sudanese military actors that is lacking with the UN. That familiarity must be translated into tangible diplomatic coercion, namely, the bargaining of safeguarded humanitarian corridors and observed access arrangements that enable the provision of aid to the most vulnerable populations. Leverage unused is leverage wasted.

5.4 Study implications.

The implications of this research go beyond the case of El Fasher.

Hypothetically, the results affirm and confound current models. The ripeness theory put forward by Zartman (2000) is proved right, the RSF could never have found the conflict to be ripe to be negotiated with its side, and there is no such power of the AU diplomatic pressure that can replace the structural conditions that make parties willing to negotiate. The institutional legitimacy deficit framework developed by Amare (2025) is also confirmed, the suspended membership of Sudan has exactly the paradox Amare envisions, the institutionalized actor takes advantage of its vague status to challenge institutional authority. What the El Fasher case contributes to such frameworks is a better understanding of the interactions of several restrictions at the same time. Ripeness failure, lack of legitimacy, lack of political will and interference of external spoilers did not act in isolation, they complemented each other to the extent that the institutional paralysis of the AU would have been predicted by no single theoretical framework.

The most significant implication of the study to policymakers in the AU is that institutional activity devoid of capacity to enforce is not an alternative to the effective protection, but a kind of institutional self-deception that may in fact increase the problems by giving the illusion of response where there is none. El Fasher was burnt as the AU gave communiqués, ordered inquiries, and denounced atrocities. It is not that they should not be done but that they must be supported by the political will and material ability to do so.

To the humanitarian practitioners and civil society organisations dealing with Sudan and other such situations, the study recommends that the accountability mechanisms of the AUs, especially the ACHPR, are still worth working with as partners, despite their weaknesses. The way of justice via continental human

rights institutions is long, flawed and often blocked. It is also the most available way to many communities involved. The challenge that practitioners have to cope with is balancing between managing expectations and maintaining engagement.

In a broader sense, this paper can be added to a key debate in the governance of African security: is the normative architecture that the AU has constructed since 2002 adequate to alter the behaviour of member states and conflict parties or is it increasingly a complex, but descriptive, framework of failures that it cannot avert? El Fasher leaves that debate unsolved, but it focuses it significantly.

5.5 Final Reflections

This dissertation was authored when the crisis being discussed was still going on. That closeness is a blessing, as well as a curse. The benefit lies in immediacy, the events which are analysed in this case are reported in real time, and the institutional reactions discussed are the ones of an organization that continues to struggle with the effects of its own limitations. The weight is that the human price of those restrictions is not yet a thing of the past. It is ongoing. People continue to be displaced. Responsibility is yet to arrive. The city to which the name of this dissertation is given on nearly every page is not yet at peace.

As an intellectual exercise, researching the response of the AU to El Fasher has been illuminating. The limitations exist, are real, detectable and to a large extent can be overcome, should the political will to overcome them exist. It is not the problem of the normative architecture of the AU. Article 4(h) exists. APSA exists. The ACHPR exists. The African Standby Force is at least on paper. The only thing that is lacking in adequate quantity is the political goodwill of the member states to ensure that these instruments are functioning in the manner they were created to.

One of the reasons why the African Union was established was to reject the legacy of OAU that preferred to turn its head. The Constitutive Act, its intervention provisions and its human rights commitments is a real and significant institutional aspiration. What El Fasher shows us is that ambition and action are not identical and the gap between them is a matter of human lives. The El Fasher people, as in Tigray, Cabo Delgado and too many other locations, needed no better words in Addis Ababa. They needed protection. It is not only an institutional reform

question to bridge the gap between what the AU says and what it does. It is a moral duty, and a duty which this institution, and the continent which it serves, cannot afford to continue to put off.

Hopefully, this small contribution to the debates that will shape what type of an institution the African Union becomes, is the small contribution made by this work, despite its meager scope but sincere conclusions.

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