



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Is the US returning to the Middle East via Sudan?



After a long time, the US has entered the scene as a direct actor in a regional peace process in the negotiations between the two conflicting parties in Sudan.

The US, with Saudi Arabia, is brokering a fragile truce after 3 weeks of fierce fighting in Sudan, with more than 500 dead and hundreds of thousands displaced, which brought the country close to collapse.

The US has managed to bring representatives of the warring Sudanese groups led by the head of the army, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the leader of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, General Mohamed Hamdan, to the negotiating table.

The negotiation goals are not set high. The objective is to stop the fighting and extinguish the fire.

They need to maintain a ceasefire for as long as possible, and establish humanitarian corridors in the capital Khartoum and the neighbouring city of Omdurman, where the fighting took place.

The goal is also to reach agreements on the protection of civil infrastructure, particularly medical facilities.

The negotiations do not aim to bringing a final political solution to the Sudan crisis. That will be the task of the key actors, with the support of the African Union and the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development in Eastern Africa.

Continuation of Saudi Arabia's offensive diplomacy

Saudi Arabia, the host of the first negotiations between the Sudanese rivals since the conflicts began in mid-April, has played an agile card in establishing peace in Sudan.

"The last thing Saudi Arabia needs right now is a Syria on the Red Sea", said Aziz Alghashian, a Saudi expert on regional relations.

Apart from Saudi Arabia's security concerns regarding its immediate surroundings, Riyadh's peace initiative with respect to its overseas African neighbour Sudan, is part of its broader, regional diplomatic action in full swing.

In the last two months, Saudi Arabia reached a major agreement on the normalisation of relations with Iran, which resulted in peace negotiations in Yemen, the return of Syria to the Arab League, and this trend continued with peace negotiations between the Sudanese rivals.

Riyadh is on a diplomatic streak, driven by its ambition to position itself as a decisive regional leader in the resolution of open conflicts and general stabilisation.

The strategy is pragmatic and has the idea of "Saudi first", with which Riyadh wants to position itself not only as an oil giant but as a tourist and business hub in the Middle East, and to increase its role on the global stage.

There has been a lot of success in these efforts so far. Riyadh was supported by China, which mediated the most important diplomatic thaw between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Cautious return of the US

However, the absence of the US, as a traditional ally of Saudi Arabia and a long-term irreplaceable actor in all important processes in the Middle East, was noticeable.

This was until the intra-Sudanese dialogue,

when Washington returned to the scene. Not as a leader, but as a co-facilitator in the process, together with Riyadh. The participation of the US alone is a move that deserves attention.

"We will do whatever we can to alleviate this crisis. We are leading this effort, but we are working very closely with the United States and our regional and international partners", Fahad Nazer from the Saudi embassy in the US told CNN.

The Biden administration did not set its relationship with the Gulf countries as one of its Middle Eastern priorities. The focus was on the nuclear deal with Iran and the war in Yemen.

That neglect represented a continuation of Biden's rather harsh pre-election rhetoric towards the leaders in the Gulf states, including when he said he would make Saudi Arabia a "pariah", which distanced the region and the US from each other.

China made the most of this retreat with a major business and political rapprochement with Riyadh and Iran, which it capitalised on by mediating the Saudi-Iran diplomatic thaw.

Matching interests

The US has an interest in regaining its position in the Middle East because of the disruption in the oil market caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The Middle East has become a training ground for US competition with Chinese influence and growing political and security ambitions of regional actors: Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

In a situation where Israel's allied influence in the region has been absent, and its normalisation of relations with the Arab environment has been losing momentum, the US is left with the option of direct involvement in important political and security flows in the region.

Sudan is an excellent opportunity for that. The US has a great interest in preventing radicalisation in the east and the central part of the continent because the Sudanese crisis could very easily spill over into the wider area.

If the conflict in Sudan is not stopped soon, there is a danger of the spread and strengthening of Islamic extremists in the entire region, including the participation of Russian paramilitary formations, which previously operated in Central Africa.

The interests of the US and Saudi Arabia overlapped in the joint peace initiative for Sudan. This is a factor that gives reason for optimism that the conflict could be resolved soon, which would return the country to the process of democratisation.

Riyadh is pleased that the US has accepted its leadership in the peace process for Sudan, thus recognising Saudi Arabia's authority in regional mediation initiatives.

Saudi Arabia shows that it wants to confirm the traditional partnership with the US and create regional relations in cooperation, not confrontation, with the US.

Its previous "solo" diplomatic moves in the region, particularly the acceptance of Chinese mediation with Iran, were in some way calls to Washington to become more actively involved in the Middle Eastern scene and not to observe it from the sidelines.

Both sides pragmatically expect peace dividends from the conflict resolution in the region, with Sudan first, but also at other regional crisis points in the future.

If they manage to achieve results in the Sudanese peace talks, and there are great prospects for that, the US and Saudi Arabia would also pass an important test of their own partnership, which they are interested in reactivating.