

## Evaluating the Tumaini Initiative within South Sudan's Fragile Transitions

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### ABSTRACT

South Sudan continues to grapple with escalating instability, a deteriorating security environment, and uneven peace implementation despite signing the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018. In this context, the Tumaini Initiative was launched as an inclusive mediation platform to engage hold-out groups outside the main peace agreement and to support a more comprehensive settlement. This study examined the political and security dimensions of the Tumaini Initiative and assessed whether it represents effective conflict transformation or merely a parallel peacemaking with limited legitimacy. Using qualitative analysis of recent reports and monitoring bodies, the article situates Tumaini within broader national politics, ongoing violations, and regional diplomacy. The findings show that while Tumaini reflects an attempt to broaden inclusion, its structural integration into formal peace mechanisms remains weak, raising questions about its capacity to prevent relapse into widespread violence. The conclusion calls for deeper constitutional integration and more robust support from regional guarantors.

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### Abbreviations

CRSV – Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

IGAD – Intergovernmental Authority on Development

R-ARCSS – Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan

RJMEC – Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission

SSPDF – South Sudan People's Defence Forces

UNMISS – United Nations Mission in South Sudan

### Background

South Sudan's political transition remains structurally fragile, shaped by entrenched elite deadlock, delayed reforms, and the stalled implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Since independence, cycles of negotiated settlements and relapses into violence have produced a governance system heavily dependent on elite power-sharing rather than institutional consolidation [1-2]. The September 2024 decision to extend the transitional government and postpone national elections to December 2026 marked the second major extension of the transition, underscoring a persistent incapacity to meet core benchmarks such as constitutional drafting, security sector reform, and electoral preparations [3]. Rather than stabilizing the country, this extension coincided with intensifying political competition, fragmentation within armed movements, and declining public confidence in the peace process [4]. As a result, the transition has increasingly come to be viewed as open-ended, elite-managed, and disconnected from the broader population.

The deterioration of the security environment since 2024 illustrates the widening gap between formal peace agreements and realities on the ground. Despite the existence of the permanent ceasefire under R-ARCSS, violence surged across Jonglei, Unity, Upper Nile, and Central Equatoria states through 2025 and into early 2026 [5-6]. According to monitoring reports, the first quarter of 2025 recorded 1,607 civilian victims, killed, injured, abducted, or subjected to sexual violence, representing an 86 percent increase compared to the previous quarter [7]. From April to June 2025 alone, 334 incidents of conflict-related violence affected 1,518 civilians [8]. These figures demonstrate that insecurity has not merely persisted but intensified, revealing the limited deterrent effect of elite-level political agreements on sub-national conflict dynamics.

The escalation of violence continued into 2026, further exposing the weakness of existing security arrangements and command structures. Between late December 2025 and January 2026, fighting in Jonglei state displaced more than 100,000 people, compounding already severe humanitarian pressures [9]. Reporting in early 2026 indicated that 72 percent of civilian victims were attributed to community-based militias, while 21 percent were linked to conventional armed actors, including the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) and the SPLA-IO. This distribution highlights the extent to which localized violence operates beyond direct elite control [10]. The humanitarian consequences have been severe: by mid-2025, approximately 1.9 million people were internally displaced, while an estimated 7.7 million faced severe food insecurity [11].

Within this volatile context, the Tumaini Initiative emerged as a parallel diplomatic effort aimed at addressing gaps in the existing peace framework. Coined from Kiswahili to mean "hope", Tumaini

was launched in Nairobi, Kenya, in May 2024, the initiative sought to engage non-signatory opposition groups, sometimes referred to as hold out groups to broaden the peace process in South Sudan [12]. However, Tumaini has struggled to gain consistent traction. Negotiations have been repeatedly adjourned, with a significant breakdown reported in February 2025, raising doubts about its coherence [3]. Critics argue that Tumaini risks legitimizing armed rebellion and creating a competing political structure while reports indicate that critical pre-election benchmarks, such as force unification and constitution-making, remain largely unimplemented [13-15].

Constitutional and electoral constraints further complicate the transition and cast doubt on prospects for credible elections in 2026. Officially, the postponement is intended to allow completion of the legal framework; however, political space has narrowed significantly [16]. Human rights organizations have documented rising political detentions and persistent restrictions on civil society. These trends coincide with intensified clashes between the SSPDF and the SPLA-IO, eroding conditions necessary for free and fair elections [7]. Against this backdrop, this study employs thematic analysis of reports from UNMISS, the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, and RJMEC to assess whether the Tumaini Initiative represents a genuine shift in conflict dynamics or merely an extension of elite bargaining [17-18].

## Methods and Materials

### Study Design

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design to examine the Tumaini Initiative within the broader peace and security architecture of South Sudan. The case study approach was selected because it allowed for an in-depth examination of a contemporary political process situated within a complex and fluid real-world context. The design focused on understanding how the Tumaini Initiative functioned as a parallel mediation track alongside the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), and how this interaction influenced political inclusion, security dynamics, and implementation outcomes. The study was bounded temporally between May 2024, when the Tumaini Initiative was launched, and early 2026, when violence and political tensions escalated further. This design enabled systematic exploration of institutional behavior, elite bargaining, and peace process fragmentation, while remaining sensitive to the evolving political and security environment during South Sudan's extended transitional period.

### Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through a structured review of publicly available secondary sources published between 2024 and early 2026. Primary documentary sources included quarterly and special reports produced by the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission and official press releases and human rights briefings issued by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan. Additional primary materials consisted of investigative and thematic reports from international human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch. Secondary sources comprised UN Security Council briefings, official communiqués and statements from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, and reputable journalistic reporting on election postponement, peace negotiations, and armed clashes. Documents were identified through targeted searches of institutional websites and verified humanitarian information platforms, ensuring relevance to the Tumaini Initiative, security trends, and transitional governance.

## Data Analysis Methods and Tools Applied

The collected documents were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. All texts were systematically reviewed and manually coded to identify recurring patterns related to political inclusivity, institutional legitimacy, security outcomes, and implementation gaps. Initial open coding was conducted to extract key concepts, followed by focused coding to cluster these concepts into broader analytical themes. Cross-source comparison was used to validate emerging themes and to identify discrepancies between elite political commitments and documented realities on the ground. Particular attention was paid to temporal shifts in reporting to capture changes in violence trends and negotiation dynamics over time. Analytical rigor was enhanced through triangulation across institutional, humanitarian, and civil society sources. Although no software-based qualitative analysis tools were used, a structured coding matrix was maintained to ensure consistency and transparency. The study acknowledged limitations related to reporting bias and rapidly evolving events but relied on triangulation to mitigate these constraints.

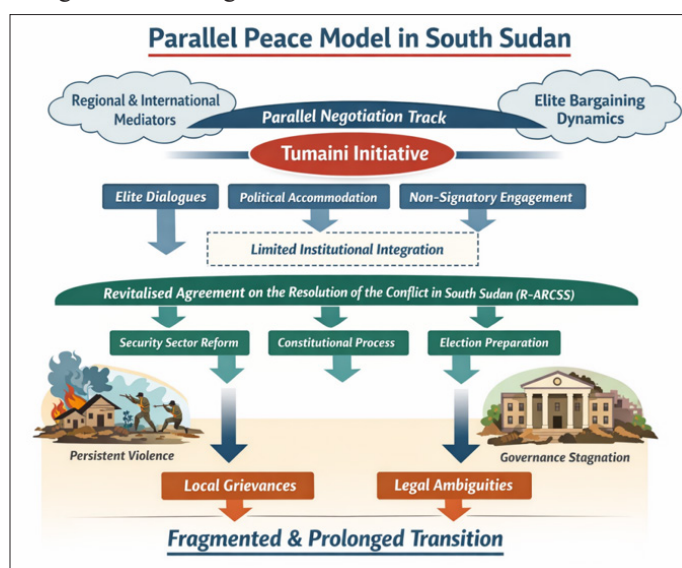


Figure 1: Data Analysis Conceptual Framework

Source: Authors

## Findings

### Theme 1: Institutional Legitimacy and Parallel Peacemaking

Documentary analysis presented in Table 1 below reveals that the Tumaini Initiative operates as a parallel track to the R-ARCSS rather than an integrated component. RJMEC and UNMISS reports characterize the initiative as a “confidence-building platform” intended to engage holdout groups. However, legal reviews of the Transitional Constitution and parliamentary records show a lack of formal ratification or legislative anchoring. Official monitoring reports highlight significant ambiguity regarding reporting lines, noting that Tumaini's outcomes are not formally embedded within the oversight structures of the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission. This institutional decoupling creates a “dual-track” framework that complicates the enforcement of peace commitments. These findings suggest that Tumaini functions as a diplomatic “side-channel” that risks fragmenting South Sudan's peace architecture. By operating outside formal constitutional structures, the initiative prioritizes flexible political dialogue over rule-bound institutionalization, potentially weakening the legal authority of existing transitional mechanisms.

**Table 1: Institutional Legitimacy and Parallel Peacemaking**

Theme	Evidence from Document Review and Official Reports
Parallel Institutional Architecture	Documentation indicates the Tumaini Initiative operates outside the formal R-ARCSS implementation matrix. RJMEC reports and legal analyses highlight a lack of formal ratification within existing parliamentary or constitutional structures.
Mandate Ambiguity	Analysis of the High-Level Mediation for South Sudan (Tumaini) texts shows no clear legal linkage to R-ARCSS oversight or formal ceasefire monitoring bodies (CTSAMVM).
Elite-Centered Negotiation	Review of participant lists and communiqué signatures shows a concentration of high-level political figures, with a documented absence of formal mechanisms for grassroots decision-making.

**Source:** RJMEC quarterly reports, IGAD communiqués, and legal critiques of the transitional framework (2024–2026).

**Theme 2: Security Dynamics and Civilian Protection**

A review of UN security updates and humanitarian trackers indicates that the Tumaini Initiative has had a negligible impact on sub-national violence (See Table 2). While high-level communiqués suggest elite de-escalation, incident reports from Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile show sustained civilian victimization and militia activity. Analysis of the Tumaini protocols confirms an absence of new operational mechanisms for ceasefire enforcement or disarmament. Security sector assessments further reveal that the initiative lacks a formal link to the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM), leaving localized armed actors largely unaffected by the Nairobi-based negotiations. The data highlights a profound disconnect between elite political stabilization and grassroots security. Tumaini appears to serve as a high-level political management tool that lacks the operational leverage required to transform localized conflict dynamics or provide tangible civilian protection.

**Table 2: Security Dynamics and Civilian Protection**

Theme	Evidence from Document Review and Security Reports
Limited Impact on Violence	UNMISS and humanitarian reports indicate sustained sub-national violence and civilian victimization in Jonglei and Unity States occurring concurrently with the Nairobi negotiations.
Security–Politics Disconnect	Analysis of the Tumaini protocols reveals an absence of new enforcement mechanisms or specific provisions addressing community-based militias and localized armed actors.
Stalled Security Sector Reform	Security monitoring reports confirm minimal progress on the graduation and deployment of Unified Forces, despite these being cited as objectives in both R-ARCSS and Tumaini-related documentation.

**Source:** UNMISS situational updates and Human Rights Watch monitoring reports.

**Theme 3: Elite Bargaining and Political Incentives**

Policy briefs and transitional decrees suggest in Table 3, demonstrate that Tumaini reinforces traditional elite bargaining norms. Analysis of the 2024–2026 extension timelines indicates that the initiative provides a framework for political actors to preserve relevance without committing to structural accountability. Civil society position papers reviewed for this study argue that the process risks “incentivizing rebellion” by granting political concessions to armed holdouts. Furthermore, legislative records show that the focus on elite accommodation in Nairobi has coincided with the continued stagnation of core governance reforms required by the R-ARCSS, facilitating a state of “negotiated delay.” The evidence indicates that Tumaini functions primarily to sustain elite consensus rather than to catalyze systemic reform. By rewarding armed opposition with negotiation leverage, the initiative may inadvertently perpetuate a cycle where political power is brokered through violence rather than institutional transition.

**Table 3. Elite Bargaining and Political Incentives**

Theme	Evidence from Document Review and Political Context
Political Survival Incentives	Policy papers and decrees reviews suggest that engagement in Tumaini aligns with the extension of the transitional period to December 2026, facilitating continued elite presence in governance.
Incentivized Non-Compliance	Comparative analysis of peace agreements suggests that the inclusion of holdout groups without punitive measures for prior violations is documented in various civil society critiques as a "reward for rebellion."
Status Quo Maintenance	Legislative reviews show a correlation between the timeline of the Tumaini talks and the postponement of core electoral reforms, suggesting a trend of negotiated stagnation.

**Source:** South Sudanese Presidential Decrees and international crisis group policy briefs.

**Theme 4: Constitutional and Electoral Implications**

Legal audits of the transition period show that key benchmarks, presented in Table 4, remain stalled despite the Tumaini talks. Analysis of official electoral timelines reveals that the initiative has not accelerated the legal preparations necessary for the December 2026 deadline. Furthermore, human rights monitoring reports document a shrinking of civic space, including restrictions on political assembly and media freedom. Documentation from legal advocacy groups emphasizes that Tumaini lacks the formal mandate to alter the constitutional framework, leading to significant legal uncertainty regarding the legitimacy of future electoral outcomes. The findings suggest that Tumaini contributes to a “constitutional vacuum.” Without formal integration into the national legal framework, the initiative risks becoming a distraction from the urgent technical and legal requirements of a credible democratic transition.

**Table 4: Constitutional and Electoral Implications**

Theme	Evidence from Document Review and Monitoring Reports
Constitutional Ambiguity	Legal reviews of the South Sudan Transitional Constitution and subsequent amendments show no formal codification of the Tumaini outcomes into national law.
Implementation Gaps	Electoral Commission reports and transition monitoring trackers confirm that voter registration and constituency delimitation remain stalled despite the ongoing diplomatic initiative.
Shrinking Civic Space	Human rights reports from 2025–2026 document a rise in political detentions and restrictions on press freedoms, contrasting with the initiative's stated goals of political liberalization.

Source: National Elections Commission (NEC) Status Reports.

**Theme 5: Inclusivity and Local Legitimacy**

Table 5 shows a distinction between “symbolic” and “substantive” inclusion. While civil society and women’s groups are documented as participants, they are frequently categorized as “observers” without decision-making authority. Media monitoring and local NGO reports indicate a significant deficit in grassroots awareness of the Tumaini objectives. Furthermore, an analysis of the negotiation agendas reveals a focus on power-sharing and security arrangements, with a documented absence of localized grievances, such as land rights and cattle-raiding, which remain the primary drivers of conflict for rural populations. The results indicate a significant legitimacy gap. By prioritizing a top-down, elite-centered approach, Tumaini lacks the social capital and local ownership necessary to address the root causes of violence, limiting its potential to foster a durable, society-wide peace.

**Table 5: Inclusivity and Local Legitimacy**

Theme	Evidence from Document Review and Community Perspectives
Formal vs. Substantive Inclusion	Review of the mediation framework documents indicates that while civil society groups are listed as "observers," they lack voting or veto power in the primary negotiation chambers.
Limited Grassroots Awareness	Media monitoring and NGO outreach reports indicate a significant gap in information dissemination regarding the Tumaini Initiative in rural and peripheries areas.
Structural Grievances	Analysis of the Tumaini agenda items shows a prioritization of power-sharing over localized drivers of conflict such as land disputes and cattle-related violence.

Source: civil society position papers and local media sentiment analysis.

**Theme 6: Regional and International Mediation Dynamics**

Documentary analysis of regional diplomatic correspondence highlights a complex and often fragmented mediation landscape. Official statements from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union (AU) reveal significant coordination challenges between the Kenyan-led Tumaini track and existing regional peace frameworks. Analysis

of mediation budgets indicates a high level of external dependency, with nearly all logistical and financial support provided by international donors rather than domestic or regional institutions. Furthermore, a review of regional press releases and diplomatic cables shows divergent perceptions of Kenya’s neutrality, with several stakeholders questioning the alignment of the Nairobi track with the established R-ARCSS oversight mechanisms. These findings suggest that the Tumaini Initiative suffers from “mediation proliferation,” where overlapping mandates between Kenya and IGAD risk diluting diplomatic pressure. The heavy reliance on external funding and the lack of a unified regional command structure undermine the long-term sustainability of the process, making the peace initiative vulnerable to shifts in international donor priorities rather than being anchored in local or regional political will.

**Table 6: Regional and International Mediation Dynamics**

Theme	Evidence from Document Review and Regional Statements
Mandate Overlap	IGAD communiqués and AU Peace and Security Council statements reflect a lack of synchronization between the Nairobi-led track and the pre-existing IGAD-led frameworks.
External Dependency	Budgetary reviews of the mediation process show near-total reliance on international donor funding for the logistics and facilitation of the talks.
Mediation Legitimacy	Diplomatic cables and regional press releases reveal divergent views among neighboring states regarding the neutrality and mandate of the Kenyan-led facilitation.

Source: African Union (AU) and IGAD diplomatic correspondence.

**Results and Discussions**

The results demonstrate that the Tumaini Initiative functions as a parallel institutional architecture, a conclusion that aligns with the “dual-track” diplomacy often observed in protracted conflicts. While the reports frame the initiative as a necessary confidence-building measure to include holdout groups, legal and constitutional critiques suggest it lacks formal integration into the R-ARCSS framework. This disconnect echoes the warnings of regarding document-based evidence, where the absence of formal legislative anchoring indicates a lack of institutional enforceability [19]. While proponents argue that such flexibility is necessary for “peace writ large” critics argue that bypassing the RJMEC’s oversight risks diluting the authority of existing transitional institutions and creating fragmented governance structures that are difficult to monitor or hold accountable.

Regarding security dynamics, the evidence reveals a stark disconnect between high-level diplomatic protocols and sub-national violence documentation confirms that despite active negotiations in Nairobi, civilian victimization remained high in Jonglei and Unity States. suggests that inclusive peace processes should theoretically reduce violence; however, the Tumaini Initiative lacks the localized enforcement mechanisms required to influence community-level militias. While the initiative is credited by some for maintaining a dialogue among senior commanders, human rights monitors like and critique the framework for failing to prioritize civilian protection or establish new ceasefire monitoring links, suggesting that the initiative functions more as a political stabilizer for elites than a security guarantee for the populace [20].

The results further indicate that the Tumaini Initiative reinforces elite bargaining norms, a phenomenon that links to the preservation of political relevance during extended transitions. The documentation suggests that the extension of the transitional period to December 2026 provided a window for elites to renegotiate power sharing without addressing structural reforms [3]. While some policy briefs from African Arguments suggest this accommodation is a pragmatic necessity to avoid a return to full-scale war, civil society groups argue that such a model incentivizes “strategic rebellion,” where groups use violence to secure a seat at the negotiation table [12-13]. This cycle, as supported by the case study logic illustrates how negotiated stagnation can become a tool for status quo maintenance rather than a pathway to transformative change.

The constitutional and electoral implications of the initiative remain a point of significant contention. Legal audits and reports from the National Constitutional Review Commission highlight that core benchmarks, such as voter registration and the unified command structure, remain largely unimplemented [15]. While the government maintains that the Tumaini track provides the political consensus necessary for these tasks critics in the legal community argue that the lack of constitutional codification creates a “constitutional vacuum.” Furthermore, reports regarding the detention of journalists and shrinking civic space suggest a political environment that is fundamentally at odds with the “free and fair” electoral requirements outlined in the R-ARCSS, indicating that the initiative has not yet mitigated the underlying threats to a credible democratic transition [16].

In terms of inclusivity, the analysis reveals a disparity between formal observer status and substantive decision-making power. Documents from various women’s rights organizations suggest that while the “rhetoric of inclusion” is present, the actual negotiation of power remains restricted to political and military elites emphasizes that for peace to be durable, it must have grassroots legitimacy; however, the lack of localized awareness reported in media monitors suggests a significant legitimacy gap. While the mediation framework includes civil society representatives, critics argue their role is largely symbolic, failing to address structural grievances such as land disputes and cattle raiding—issues that defines as central to genuine conflict transformation but which remain largely absent from the Tumaini agenda [17].

Finally, the regional and international mediation dynamics surrounding Tumaini reflect a fragmented diplomatic landscape. The diplomatic significance of Kenya’s role is acknowledged in statements, yet the lack of synchronization between the Nairobi track and the pre-existing IGAD frameworks is a documented point of friction. Data suggests that the initiative’s heavy reliance on external funding makes it vulnerable to donor fatigue and shifting international priorities. While some see the Kenyan facilitation as a fresh alternative to stalled Juba-based talks, others critique it for adding another layer of complexity to an already “overloaded” peace process [12]. This external dependency, coupled with divergent views on mediator neutrality, underscores the challenges of achieving a domestically institutionalized peace that survives beyond the duration of international financial support [21-33].

### Conclusions

The Tumaini Initiative embodies both the promise and pitfalls of parallel peacemaking in protracted conflicts like that of South Sudan. Although it aspires to broaden participation and address lingering spoilers, its weak integration into constitutional and peace institutions raises concerns about legitimacy and impact. The continuation of violence and chronic political tensions,

compounded by delayed elections and disputed constitutional processes, highlights the limitations of negotiation tracks that do not secure meaningful buy-in from national institutions, armed actors, and affected communities. For Tumaini to contribute meaningfully to peace, its outputs must be formally linked to constitutional reform, legislative endorsement, and joint monitoring mechanisms that bridge elite commitments with security sector reforms and civilian protection outcomes. Without such anchoring, Tumaini risks becoming another iteration of elite accommodation that fails to transform the conflict’s structural drivers.

### Recommendations

1. Tumaini protocols should undergo national legislative review to align with the R-ARCSS and South Sudan’s transitional constitutional framework.
2. Regional guarantors and peace partners should establish joint monitoring mechanisms to harmonize Tumaini activities with RJMEC mandates.
3. Peace agreements must translate into security sector reforms that address community militia disarmament and protection of civilians.
4. Local voices should be systematically included to ensure that peace processes do not remain elite-centric and disconnected from ground realities.

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