

Sudan's Civil War: Regional Powers and Paramilitary Dynamics Fueling Africa's Crisis

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Introduction

Sudan's civil war, which ignited in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), has evolved far beyond a domestic power struggle. It represents a complex crisis, fueled by paramilitary violence and deeply intertwined with regional and international rivalries. The fighting has killed thousands, displaced millions, and pushed the state toward collapse. Beyond the battlefield, the conflict is shaped by a complex ecosystem of regional rivalries, paramilitary networks, and the legacies of Sudan's fractured political trajectory.



Credit: AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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As the war deepens, it risks triggering a wider humanitarian and geopolitical disaster across the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea corridor, and the Sahel. This commentary will analyze the internal drivers of the conflict, the role of regional powers, and the evolving paramilitary dynamics that are reshaping African security.

Historical Context of Sudan's Fragmented State

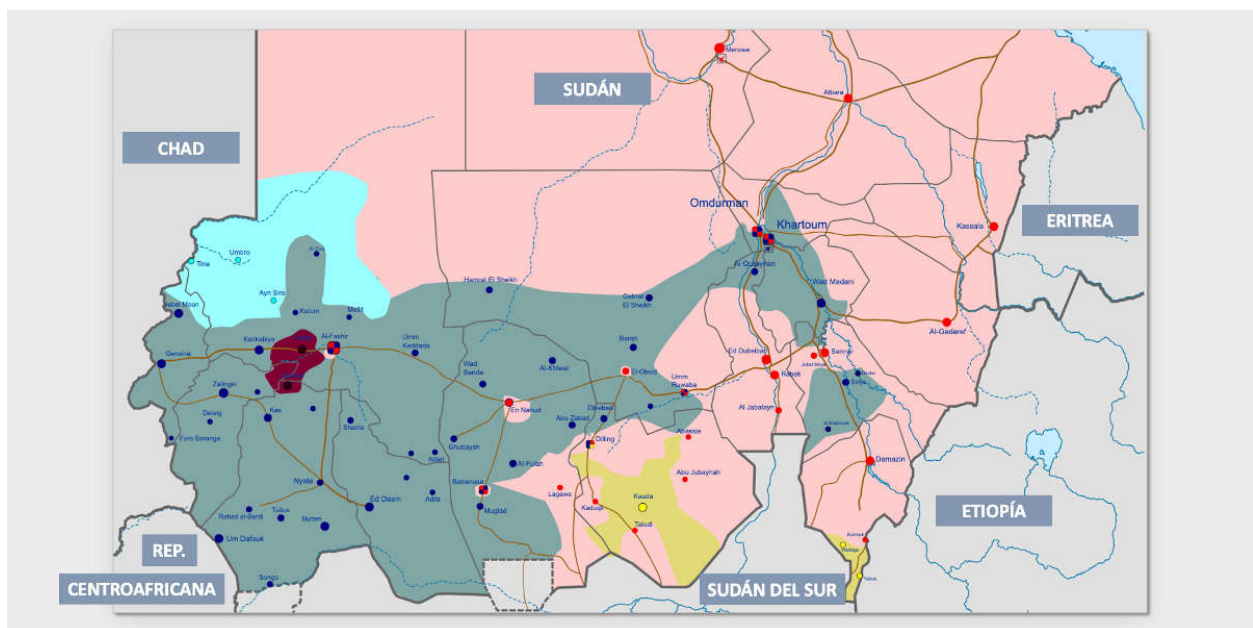
Since colonial times, the foundations for state fragmentation in Sudan were laid when imperial powers administered the territory unevenly and prioritized certain regions over others. In that time, there were divisions based on ethnic, religious, and cultural lines that institutionalized deep identity-based cleavages. After independence in 1956, those colonial-era divisions translated into persistent political and social marginalization of southern and peripheral regions, which eventually triggered civil conflicts. Even after the 2005 peace agreement and the eventual secession of the south (forming South Sudan in 2011), the remainder of Sudan remained a fragile “rump state,” wracked by regional rebellions and institutional weakness.



Sudan's Ali Osman Mohamed Taha and Sudan People's Liberation Movement leader John Garang laugh before the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Kenya's capital Nairobi, January 9, 2005.

Credit: REUTERS

The current conflict in Sudan did not begin only in 2023, its roots lie in the fragile, ill-conceived power-sharing arrangement established after the 2019 overthrow of long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir. After the overthrow of Bashir, the country had hopes for a democratic transition. But the military establishment and paramilitary elites resisted meaningful reforms. The country's transitional government, formed through a delicate civilian-military power-sharing arrangement, was fragile from the outset. The two main belligerents, the SAF, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the RSF, led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, were nominal allies in the 2021 military coup that derailed Sudan's democratic transition². Their subsequent clash was fundamentally a struggle for absolute control over the state and its vast economic resources, specifically gold mining³.



Frontlines in Sudan's civil war, November 9, 2024. Areas controlled by Sudan Armed Forces (pink), rebel Rapid Support Forces (gray) and various anti-government groups (other colors) [ElijahPepe].

² Borkena Desk. 2025. "The Outbreak: How Two Partners Became Deadly Rivals." Borkena. October 11, 2025. <https://borkena.com/2025/10/10/sudan-the-outbreak-how-two-partners-became-deadly-rivals/>

³ Simiyu, Albert. 2025. "The Sudan Conflict: Causes, Impact, and Global Consequences." Newsly KE. March 26, 2025. <https://www.newsly.co.ke/the-sudan-conflict-causes-impact-and-global-consequences/>

The SAF–RSF Rivalry: A Struggle for the State

The SAF-RSF rivalry is seen as the main driver of Sudan war. The SAF is the conventional national army, though weakened and fractured by decades of political instability. Its leadership draws from long-standing military elites in Khartoum and Riverine communities, and it has historically controlled the state apparatus. SAF was seen by many as the institution meant to preserve central state authority, public infrastructure, international recognition, and much of the administrative overhead of government. The SAF is structured, hierarchical, and institutionally entrenched, but it suffers from poor modernization and corruption.



Hemedti Vs Al Burhan. Credit: ITSS Verona

Meanwhile, the RSF represents a newer model of paramilitary power. Originating in Darfur's tribal Arab militias, it transformed into a well-funded, mobile force with regional networks, financial autonomy, and foreign patronage. RSF grew powerful not only as a fighting force but also as an economic actor (control of trade, gold, smuggling, land, etc. Their autonomy was key to their conflict with SAF over their unwillingness to fully integrate under SAF command. Hemedti cultivated an image as a populist leader in the region. He was also leveraging the RSF's involvement in gold mining and mercenary operations in Yemen and Libya to secure wealth and

political influence. The RSF's structure is decentralized and opportunistic, which allowed rapid territorial expansion but fueled internal fragmentation.

Regional Powers and Proxy Involvement

Sudan's strategic location makes it a critical arena for competing regional and global interests. The nexus of the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Red Sea are critical arenas for competing regional and global interests. The civil war is thus not merely sustained by internal dynamics but is being actively fueled and complicated by the injection of resources, arms, and diplomatic cover from external powers.

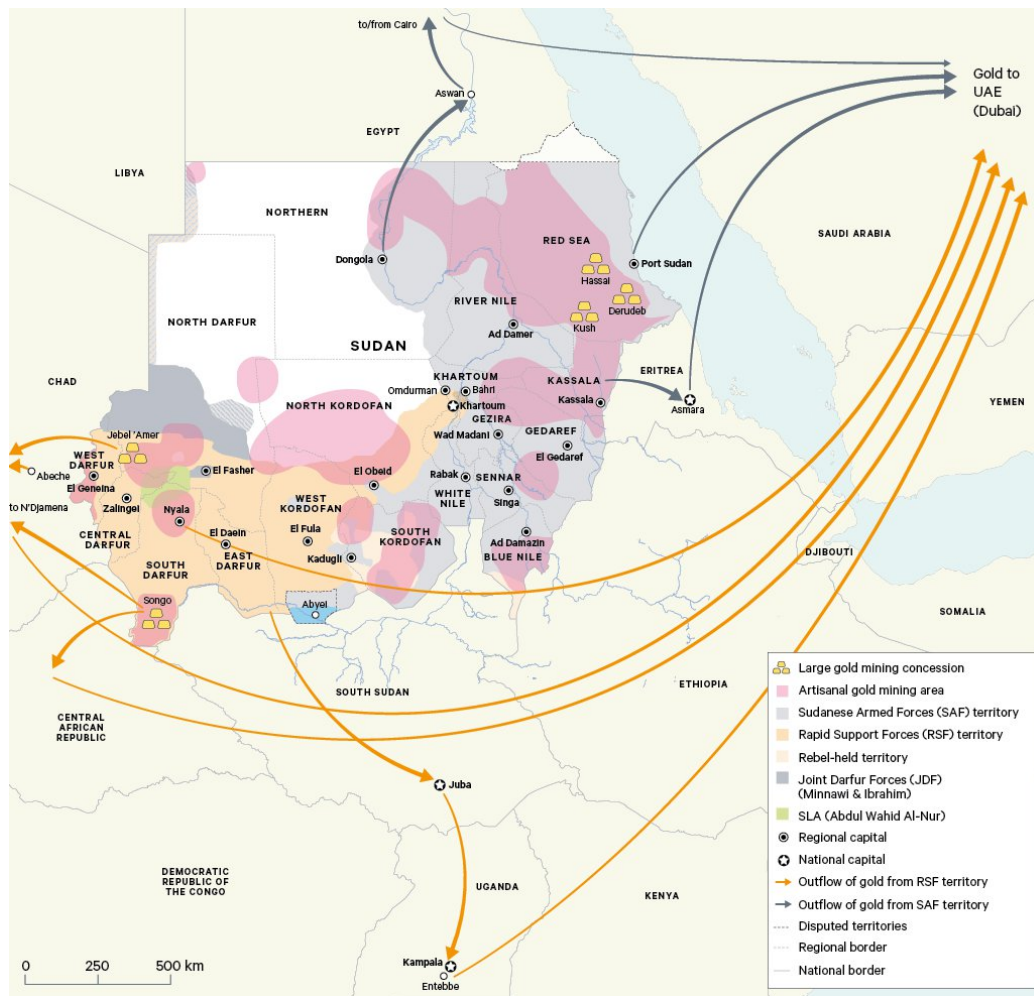
The rivalry among Gulf states is a dominant external factor. Their involvement is driven by a complex mix of geopolitics, economic opportunities, and strategic influence over Red Sea trade routes. For example: Egypt, whose primary interest is stability and the preservation of a friendly regime in Khartoum. Cairo views the SAF as a strategic ally who's capable of counterbalancing Ethiopia in the ongoing Nile dispute. Stability in Sudan safeguards Egypt's water security, border control, and trade through the Red Sea corridor. Egypt has signaled political and military backing for the SAF. Another SAF backer is Iran, which has also provided drones. Tehran hopes to secure a naval base on the Red Sea that would help it continue to support the Houthi militia in Yemen⁴. Sudan is known to have become a logistical hub for the Houthis.

On the other hand, The UAE has emerged as a key external supporter of the RSF. They are seen as the most invested foreign RSF rebels receive arms from the UAE, while the Emiratis benefit from Sudanese gold arriving in Dubai through smuggling by multiple companies, including Al Gunade⁵. The main reason for UAE to support the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) against the

⁴ Shabnam Dadparvar, and Amin Parto. 2025. "Great Powers, the Arming of Non-State Groups, and the Prolongation of Armed Conflicts in the Middle East." *Asian Review of Political Economy*4 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44216-025-00046-8>

⁵ Navarra, University of. 2024. "Civil War in Sudan: External Actors Profiting from the War." *Global Affairs and Strategic Studies*. November 2024. <https://en.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/guerra-civil-en-sudan-agentes-externos-que-sacan-provecho>

Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the national army, is that this war serves the UAE's interests in defending their enormous investments in Sudan. Sudan is key to the UAE's strategy in Africa and the Middle East, aimed at achieving political and economic hegemony while curbing democratic aspirations⁶.



Illicit Flows Fuelling Conflict in the Tri-Border. Credit: Chatham House

There are several countries who have backed the SAF, mostly driven by geopolitical and economic considerations. Key SAF supporters are Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran etc.

⁶ Plaut, Martin. 2024. "Why the United Arab Emirates Supports Sudan's Rapid Support Forces." Martin Plaut. November 17, 2024. <https://martinplaut.com/2024/11/17/why-the-united-arab-emirates-supports-sudans-rapid-support-forces/>

Egypt's primary interest in Sudan is stability and the preservation of a friendly regime in Khartoum. Cairo views the SAF as a strategic ally capable of counterbalancing Ethiopia in the ongoing Nile dispute. Stability in Sudan safeguards Egypt's water security, border control, and trade through the Red Sea corridor. Egypt has signaled political and military backing for the SAF many times. Riyadh has also involved itself, primarily through mediation efforts like the Jeddah talks, but its interests are layered, focusing on regional security and countering perceived Iranian influence⁷. Saudi Arabia maintains a more balanced position. Bordering states like Chad, South Sudan and the Sahel Region absorb massive refugee flows while navigating their own fragile political contexts. Weapons and fighters move across porous borders which creates security spillovers. Chad, in particular, faces RSF-linked ethnic dynamics that threaten its internal stability.

Beyond the Gulf, other states are drawn into the conflict. Global powers like Russia keeps control over Sudan's gold reserves and a foothold on the Red Sea, which can help bypass sanctions and project influence in Africa. The involvement of infamous Wagner Group is emblematic of a broader Russian strategy of leveraging weak states for strategic gains. In this conflict, Russia, through the Wagner Group and in collaboration with the UAE, has provided arms to the RSF. In return, Wagner has supplied the RSF with heavy weaponry, surface-to-air missiles, and logistical support to aid their campaigns against SAF⁸.

Russia's interest in Sudan is quite multifaceted. On one hand, it seeks to secure a naval base for its submarines along Sudan's coast (a project previously blocked by the Burhan government under US pressure). On the other hand, Russia aims to exploit Sudan's mineral resources, notably gold⁹.

⁷ guillermo. 2025. "Foreign Influence Is Fueling the War in Sudan - Foreign Policy Research Institute." Foreign Policy Research Institute. 2025. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/07/foreign-influence-is-fueling-the-war-in-sudan/>

⁸ "1.2.1. Major State and Non-State Armed Groups." 2025. European Union Agency for Asylum. 2025. <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/coi/sudan/2025/security-situation/12-actors-conflict/121-major-state-and-non-state-armed-groups>

⁹ Holleis, Jennifer. 2025. "Sudan War: Could Involved Foreign Powers Stop the War There?" Dw.com. Deutsche Welle. October 31, 2025. <https://amp.dw.com/en/sudan-war-could-involved-foreign-powers-stop-the-killing/a-74574524>

Sudan offers Geostrategic benefits for Russia. Meanwhile, given sanctions on Russia, especially in light of its war in Ukraine, Sudan's illicit gold flow provides a quasi-financial lifeline.

Paramilitary Dynamics: RSF's Rise and Atrocities

Understanding the RSF's rise, survival and dominance in Sudan are central to understanding why the war continues. RSF evolved from nomadic Janjaweed into a gold-rich force controlling Darfur mines. RSF's control over gold mines gives it a steady revenue stream, independent of state funding. This economic autonomy underwrites its operations, recruitment, and logistics. The group also uses smuggling networks, cross-border trafficking, and illicit trade to sustain itself. These networks operate across porous borders with countries like Chad, CAR, Libya which potentially further make RSF resilient even under pressure. Economic-paramilitary hybrid structure helps RSF survive sanctions, blockades, and attempts at disarmament. RSF tactics include drone strikes on infrastructure like Merowe Power Station and attacks on aid convoys. UN experts note both sides withhold food as warfare, but RSF's ethnic violence by blocking supplies and killing non-Arab groups evokes Darfur's horrors. This paramilitary dominance shifts Sudan's war from conventional battles to asymmetric terror¹⁰.

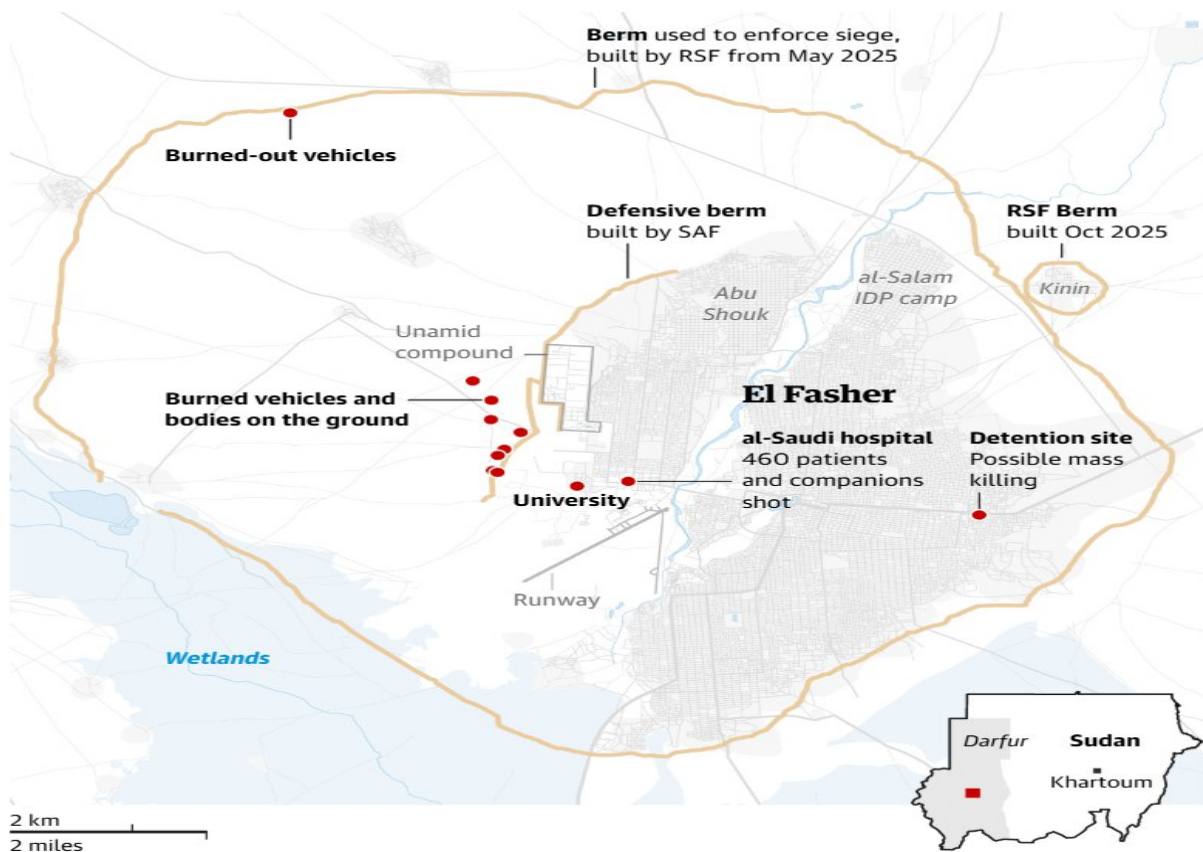
In 2025, RSF overran SAF's El Fasher stronghold, looting hospitals and detaining over 1,000 civilians in acts decried as war crimes¹¹. Satellite imagery from Yale researchers revealed clusters of bodies and bloodstains. Videos showed RSF fighters executing unarmed men at sites like El Fasher University and Saudi Hospital, where over 460 died, including patients and staff. Survivors reported rapes of dozens of women and girls, abductions for ransom, and looting.

¹⁰ "The Final Game in Sudan and the Proxy Chessboard." 2025. Setav.org. May 22, 2025.

<https://www.setav.org/en/the-final-game-in-sudan-and-the-proxy-chessboard>

¹¹ Salih, Zeinab Mohammed. 2025. "'They Killed Civilians in Their Beds': Chaos and Brutality Reign after Fall of El Fasher." The Guardian. The Guardian. October 30, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/oct/30/they-killed-civilians-in-their-beds-chaos-and-brutality-reign-after-fall-of-el-fasher>

Satellite imagery from 27-30 Oct 2025 reveals evidence of atrocities in El-Fasher



Source: satellite imagery from Vantor and Airbus DS.

analysis by the Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health

Humanitarian Impact and Regional Consequences

Sudan's civil war has triggered one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, with over 12 million people displaced internally and 3.3 million refugees fleeing to neighboring states as of late 2025¹². Famine grips North Darfur camps like Zamzam, where RSF assaults have destroyed clinics and food supplies, leaving 4 million children acutely malnourished amid aid blockades by both SAF and RSF. Health infrastructure lies in ruins, hospitals looted, cholera outbreaks while gender-

¹² UNHCR. 2025. "Sudan Crisis Explained." UNHCR. April 9, 2025. <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/sudan-crisis-explained/>

based violence surges. El Fasher survivors reported systematic RSF rapes during recent massacres. Recent RSF atrocities amplify the catastrophe; October 2025 El Fasher fall killed 1,500-2,000 civilians via executions and ethnic purges, displacing 460,000 more; December drone strikes in South Kordofan's Kalogi claimed 79 lives, including 43 children. UN projections warn of famine expansion to 755,000 in acute starvation by early 2026, with half Sudan's population, about 25 million needs aid inaccessible due to violence¹³. The spillover effect on the neighboring countries are quite catastrophic as well. Countries like Chad hosts 600,000 Sudanese refugees straining their resources. Mass displacement from Sudan places enormous pressure on already fragile neighboring states, exacerbating food insecurity, climate stress, and social tensions. Ethiopia and South Sudan face militia influxes fueling border clashes.

Historically, Sudan has functioned as a geopolitical hinge between North Africa, East Africa, and Central Africa. Therefore, the war now created a multidirectional security spillover. In Chad, the Central African Republic, Libya, and South Sudan, where porous borders and weak state control already enable transnational armed networks, the proliferation of weapons and fighters from Sudan risks reinforcing existing conflict systems. RSF's cross border recruitments and smugglings are as same as the patterns of Sahelian insurgencies. It's raising fear that Sudan could become another hub in Africa's widening "arc of instability" stretching from the Sahel to the Horn. Beyond the land borders, Sudan's instability directly threatens Red Sea security which is a vital maritime corridor for global trade and energy flows. Competition among external powers for ports, naval access, and influence along Sudan's coast risks militarizing the Red Sea further, compounding existing tensions involving Gulf states, Iran, and global powers. These dynamics reveal Sudan's war as a systemic African security crisis: one that reinforces regional conflict, enables transnational paramilitary economies, and undermines efforts toward post-conflict stabilization and democratic transitions.

¹³ "Famine Tightens Grip on Sudan, with Civilians Trapped and Aid Blocked." 2025. UN News. November 3, 2025. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/11/1166253>

Conclusion

Sudan's civil war is a testament to the destructive power of a fragmented geopolitical order. It is a crisis where domestic power struggles have been weaponized by regional interests. The paramilitary dynamics of the RSF: its deep roots in Darfuri tribalism, its gold-based economic independence, and its strategic value to external patrons have proved fundamentally destabilizing to the notion of a centralized, sovereign Sudanese state. The primary hurdle to peace is not just the animosity between SAF and RSF, but the collective support by the external actors to mitigate. As long as states like the UAE, Egypt, and Russia view Sudan as a strategic prize, they will continue to provide the military and financial sustenance necessary and the war will not stop. A lasting solution requires a unified and robust international strategy that goes beyond humanitarian appeals to impose coordinated diplomatic and economic pressure on the external actors who're fueling the war. It must prioritize an inclusive, civilian-led political process that addresses the foundational issues of political economic marginalization that gave rise to groups like the RSF in the first place. Without an end to external interference, Sudan's crisis will remain a devastating and enduring scar on the continent.