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10
2026

Sudan War: Historical Drivers, Conflict Dynamics, Foreign Influence and Regional Implications

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Introduction

Sudan's 2023 war constitutes the most grievous political and humanitarian crisis in the country's modern history. It is the result of decades of state fragility, militarized governance, and competition among security elites whose power bases extended beyond the formal structures of the state. The ongoing confrontation between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has fragmented the country

territorially, destroyed urban centers, and exacerbated regional insecurity. This overview describes the historical causes of the conflict, highlights the ways it has unfolded, analyses the influence of foreign powers, and assesses Sudan's strategic importance within the region. It concludes with reflections on the conflict's implications for regional stability and prospects for future peace efforts.

The Underlying Causes of the War

The war that erupted in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) cannot be understood without reference to Sudan's long-standing structural weaknesses, the legacy of authoritarian rule, and the failure to establish a cohesive transition following the 2019 revolution. In effect, since its independence in 1956, Sudan has experienced chronic political instability, alternating between short-lived democratic periods and prolonged military dictatorships. The most consequential of these regimes was that of Omar al-Bashir, who ruled the country with an iron fist between 1989 and 2019. Bashir's tenure embedded patterns of repression, militarization, and institutional fragmentation that would ultimately set the stage for the current conflict. Besides, central to Bashir's strategy for political survival was the intentional division of the security sector. Rather than relying exclusively on the national army, he empowered multiple competing armed groups most infamously the Janjaweed militias, which were involved in several atrocities across the Darfur region and later formalized as the RSF. These parallel structures were granted substantial autonomy, including independent sources of revenue derived from gold mining, border control, and informal taxation. Over time, the RSF evolved into a powerful paramilitary organization under the leadership of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo also known as "Hemedti," whose influence increasingly rivalled that of the regular army. By institutionalizing the RSF as an official security force, Bashir created a dual military system whose internal contradictions would become uncontrollable ensuing his removal.

Since independence in 1956, Sudan experienced political instability, alternating between short-lived democratic periods and prolonged military dictatorships.

The 2019 revolution, led by civilian protest movements, succeeded in ousting Bashir but did not succeed in dismantling his legacy. The transitional government formed alongside the SAF and RSF was expected to steer the country toward democratic elections, yet the arrangement was inherently unstable. Civilian leaders pushed for reforms aimed at curbing military influence, while SAF and RSF sought to preserve economic privileges and political control. Tensions culminated in the joint SAF-RSF coup of October 2021, which removed the civilian component of the transition. Although Burhan and Hemedti had cooperated temporarily, the coup deepened structural disagreements between the two factions over the future shape of the state, economic assets, and international orientation of the country.

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The immediate catalyst for the 2023 war was the contentious divergence over the security sector reform, specifically the integration of the RSF into the regular army under a new political agreement. For SAF, a rapid integration was necessary to restore a unified command structure and consolidate its primacy within the state. While for RSF, a slow integration or the avoidance of integration was essential to maintain its autonomy and protect the economic networks that underpinned its power. The two leaders no longer trusted each other, and both mobilized their respective forces to anticipate an imminent confrontation. What erupted on 15 April 2023 was therefore not an isolated breakdown but the predictable result of decades of militarized governance, institutional decay, and failed political transitions.

The Course of the War

The conflict that commenced in April 2023 rapidly transformed from a political dispute into a national war affecting all regions of the country. Fighting initially erupted in the capital, Khartoum, where the RSF forces seized strategic locations including the presidential palace, key bridges, and several military bases. Their urban mobility and prior deployments inside the capital provided them an early crucial advantage. In response, the SAF launched several aerial bombardments and artillery strikes across densely populated areas, causing extensive destruction of Khartoum's infrastructure. Residential neighborhoods were turned into frontlines, prompting widespread displacement from the capital. As the war expanded, Darfur emerged as one of the central theatres of conflict. In several cities, including

Nyala, Zalingei, and El Geneina, the RSF consolidated its control through coordinated offensives backed by allied tribal militias. Large-scale atrocities, including ethnically targeted killings and forced displacement, were reported, evoking comparisons to the violence of the early 2000s. The fall of major towns in Darfur to RSF forces altered the territorial balance of the conflict and cemented RSF's dominance in western Sudan. Meanwhile, in the North and South Kordofan, combat unfolded along key supply routes, with both sides recruiting local militias and exploiting tribal tensions to foster their military strength. In the eastern and northern regions, the SAF succeeded to preserve relative control, leveraging longstanding ties with local communities, remnants of the former regime, and conservative factions aligned with Burhan. Port Sudan emerged as the administrative and humanitarian center for SAF controlled areas, effectively turning to a wartime capital. The bifurcation of governance between Port Sudan and RSF controlled territories highlighted the increasing fragmentation of the Sudanese state.



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By late 2024 and into 2025, the war had entered a protracted phase, characterized by shifting frontlines, localized power struggles, and the entrenchment of both military factions. Neither SAF nor RSF demonstrated the capacity to achieve a decisive victory, and the conflict became further complicated by splinter groups, warlords, and community defense forces

emerging across the country. Simultaneously, the humanitarian situation deteriorated into one of the worst crises globally. Millions were displaced internally or fled to neighboring states such as Chad, South Sudan, Egypt, and Ethiopia. Famine like conditions affected multiple regions due to disrupted agricultural production, blocked humanitarian corridors, and the collapse of state institutions. In addition to the human toll, the war has reconfigured Sudan's political economy. Both SAF and RSF heavily rely on informal taxation, smuggling networks, and the control of natural resources to sustain their operations. The war economy has become self-perpetuating, reducing incentives for negotiated settlement and increasing the likelihood of prolonged instability even if a ceasefire were achieved.

External powers influence

Foreign actors have played a critical role in both the origins and evolution of the war, reflecting Sudan's strategic geopolitical position and its importance within the broader regional dynamics. The influence of external powers has often been indirect, yet it has significantly shaped the behavior, capacities, and strategic choices of both SAF and RSF. Egypt remains a key supporter of the SAF due to historical ties, shared security interests, and concerns over political Islam. Cairo views Burhan and the SAF as a stabilizing force capable of preventing Sudan's fragmentation and preserving military-led governance across the region. Egypt's support has included political backing, limited military assistance, and coordination on border security. Its priority is Sudan aligned with its own national security considerations, particularly concerning the Nile Basin and the Grand

Ethiopian Renaissance Dam dispute. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), in contrast, has been linked to the RSF through their political, financial, and economic networks. Hemedti's gold business has been closely connected to Emirati markets, and the RSF's deployment of fighters to Yemen in previous years strengthened its ties to Abu Dhabi. Although the UAE has officially denied any direct involvement in the war, several credible investigations have suggested that RSF supply chains involve actors operating from or through Emirati territory. The implications are significant: RSF access to external resources has enabled it to sustain operations despite limited territorial access to formal state institutions.

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On the other side, Saudi Arabia has adopted a more ambivalent approach. While maintaining ties with both SAF and RSF, Riyadh has attempted to position itself as a mediator through the Jeddah peace talks co-facilitated with the United States. For Saudi Arabia, stability in Sudan is essential to safeguard Red Sea security and protect ongoing regional economic initiatives, including logistics corridors and energy investments. However, Saudi efforts have struggled to produce durable results due to the unwillingness of the parties to commit to a ceasefire. Unlike Saudi, Russia's involvement in Sudan reflects broader strategic ambitions in Africa. Through the Wagner Group and associated companies, Moscow developed partnerships with the RSF centered

around mining concessions, training, and the supply of equipment. At the same time, Russia has maintained channels with SAF as part of negotiations for a potential naval base on the Red Sea. These dual relationships allow Moscow to hedge its bets and expand influence regardless of which faction prevails. The presence of Russian linked actors has also strengthened RSF's access to external resources, contributing to its resilience.

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Neighboring states have been drawn into the conflict by necessity as well as their own strategic interests. Chad, for instance, has faced a massive influx of refugees, which has strained its domestic stability while also navigating the risk of cross-border militia activity. South Sudan represents a particularly important case of the Sudan war's regional spillover. Its economic dependence on Sudanese export infrastructure means that developments in Sudan directly affect South Sudan's fiscal position, oil revenues, and domestic stability. In December 2025, Sudanese authorities, South Sudan and other relevant actors reached a security arrangement intended to protect critical oil-export infrastructure, illustrating how the Sudan conflict has transformed oil transportation into a major regional security concern. By early 2026, oil production in South Sudan had recovered significantly from the levels recorded during

the pipeline disruption, although the country's underlying vulnerability remained.

Ethiopia, recovering from its own conflict in Tigray, remains concerned about Red Sea access and border security.

At the political level, the Sudan conflict has also interacted with South Sudan's own fragile peace process. During 2026, the implementation of the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan remained severely constrained by political tensions, violations of the ceasefire and disputes within the transitional government. The United Nations reported that the detention of First Vice-President Riek Machar and subsequent political reshuffles further weakened the power-sharing arrangement. Thus, instability in Sudan is occurring alongside renewed political and security pressures within South Sudan rather than in isolation from them. Plus, Ethiopia, recovering from its own conflict in Tigray, remains concerned about Red Sea access and border security. These dynamics highlight how Sudan's internal conflict reverberates across an already fragile region. The combined effect of foreign involvement has been to deepen the conflict and complicate diplomatic efforts. External actors often pursue competing strategic visions, weakening the possibility of a unified international approach. The result is a fragmented diplomatic landscape where proxy alignments, economic interests, and geopolitical calculations intersect with Sudan's internal divisions, diminishing prospects for a comprehensive peace agreement.

Sudan's Position and Importance in the Region

Sudan's geopolitical significance stems from its location, natural resources, population size, and role in the regional security dynamics. Located at the intersection of the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, and North Africa, Sudan serves as a critical bridge between regions that are themselves undergoing profound political transitions. Its 853-kilometre coastline along the Red Sea places the country in proximity to one of the world's most important maritime trade routes, a corridor through which a significant percentage of global commerce and energy supplies transit. Control over Red Sea access has thus made the country a focal point for the strategic ambitions of external actors such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, and China. Moreover, Sudan also plays a crucial role in the politics of the Nile Basin. Sudan's position between Ethiopia and Egypt places it at the heart of the ongoing dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The Sudanese stability is therefore essential for attenuating tensions between Addis Ababa and Cairo and for ensuring the effective management of the Nile's waters, which are critical to the livelihoods of millions. The outbreak of war has weakened Sudan's ability to influence or mediate in Nile Basin politics, creating a vacuum that may exacerbate regional competition.



Sudan's position between Ethiopia and Egypt places it at heart of ongoing dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.



Economically, Sudan possesses significant agricultural potential. Often described as the breadbasket of the region, it has the capacity to support food production not only for itself but for neighboring states, especially given increasing climate pressures in the Sahel and Horn of Africa. However, the ongoing conflict has devastated agricultural production, disrupted supply chains, and increased food insecurity across the region. The collapse of Sudanese exports and the destruction of productive infrastructure have implications for regional markets, especially in countries dependent on trade flows through Sudan. Sudan's demographic significance is also notable. As one of the largest countries in Africa by landmass and population, its instability generates substantial refugee flows that strain the capacities of neighboring states. Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Egypt are already hosting large numbers of displaced people, which exacerbates local tensions and risks destabilizing border regions. These migration flows interact with other transnational challenges such as arms trafficking, illicit trade, and the movement of extremist groups across porous borders.

In terms of security, Sudan has historically served as both a buffer and a conduit between regions marked by armed conflict. Its collapse threatens to open new corridors for transnational criminal networks and militant groups, potentially linking instability in the Sahel with that in the Horn of Africa. This risk is heightened by the fragmentation of Sudan's security apparatus and the proliferation of local militias, which create opportunities for non-state armed actors to gain influence. For these reasons, Sudan's stability is essential not only for its own population but for the wider region. The continuation of the war undermines regional development initiatives,

disrupts trade, and threatens to erode the fragile security structures that neighboring states rely upon. As such, resolving the conflict is a strategic priority for regional and international actors alike.

Conclusion

The war in Sudan is the outcome of deep-rooted historical, institutional, and political factors that converged at a moment of transition and uncertainty. The fragmentation of the security sector under Omar al-Bashir, the failure of the post-2019 transitional government to establish civilian authority, and the escalatory power struggle between SAF and RSF produced a conflict whose scale and complexity have overwhelmed national capacities. The course of the war has been marked by widespread territorial fragmentation, severe humanitarian catastrophe, and the entrenchment of armed actors with access to external supply networks. Foreign powers have influenced the conflict in ways that both reflect and reinforce regional geopolitical divides, complicating efforts to establish a unified diplomatic response. Meanwhile, Sudan's strategic position underscores the potential for its internal conflict to destabilize a wide region that is already grappling with intersecting crises.

For policymakers, the challenge lies in recognizing that Sudan's war is not simply a domestic political crisis but a regional and international security concern with long-term implications. Any sustainable solution requires coordinated international engagement, meaningful accountability mechanisms, and a political process that addresses the structural roots of militarization and state fragmentation. Without such efforts, the conflict risks becoming a permanent feature of the regional landscape, with devastating consequences for Sudan and its neighbors.

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