# Recent developments in Sudan's civil war

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## Foreign intervention and recent developments in Sudan's civil war

Shortly after its outbreak in Khartoum on 23 April 2023, the civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) turned into the most severe humanitarian crisis worldwide. Ever since, the country's population has been facing extreme water and food shortages, a medical emergency, and the world's largest mass displacement, with more than 30 million civilians needing aid. On top of this, severe

humanitarian law violations from all parties have been reported by international agencies and NGOs. Inevitably, such acute security issues have expanded to bordering countries such as – but not only – Chad, Ethiopia, and South Sudan.

As it approached its two-year anniversary, the conflict seemingly entered a new phase. In February of 2025, the SAF regained control of the capital's international airport and residential palace, and declared the city "free" of the RSF's control since the conflict first exploded; this was a significant morale booster for the Sudanese military, which is currently in control of the northern and eastern regions of the country, including the key Red Sea port of Port Sudan. Because of these recent developments, some experts believe now is the right moment to push towards de-escalation and a possible ceasefire.

However, as the war enters its third year, the RSF still controls its strongholds in the Darfur region and vast swathes of the Kordofan state and western territories. On the same day the Sudanese army regained the heart of Khartoum, the RSF declared a military alliance with southern rebel groups and, shortly after, the intention of creating a parallel government.

Additionally, mediation efforts have consistently failed in the past two years. The most significant initiative occurred on 15 April 2025, when a UK-led conference held to facilitate a ceasefire was unsuccessful, as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were not able to reach a final communique. This is particularly worrying given how a regional coalition among external actors is critical for achieving long-term peace in Sudan.

The roots of the Sudanese civil war lie in the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir's 30 years-long authoritarian regime in 2019. Al-Bashir's deposition followed popular protests calling for a democratic governance system, and was carried out jointly by two forces, the Sudanese Armed Forces, led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary junta headed by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (commonly known as HemedE) which evolved from the Janjaweed militia, accused of ethnic cleansing during the 2003 conflict in Darfur.

The power vacuum generated by the coup was hastily filled by a transitional government with both civil and military components; nonetheless, the newly formed democratic regime was never devoid of tensions and economic difficulties, exacerbated by Covid-19. Its brittle structure became obvious to the world when a coup was orchestrated by the SAF, the RSF, and a multitude of allied armed militias in October of 2021.

From here on out, the rivalry between the two groups dramatically intensified, and culminated in the conflict's onset in April 2023. Both parties blamed the outbreak on the tensions which arose concerning the way in which the RSF should be integrated into the regular armed forces. However, there might be more to it.

Sudanese stability and internal security, as well as those of the broader Horn of Africa and Red Sea region, are historically tied to the country's

strategic commodities. Rivalry over gold-mining assets and distribution channels has sustained and shaped Sudan's history of mass violence in the past, and continues to do so in the ongoing civil war.

Understanding the pivotal role of the exploitation, smuggling and militarisation of gold resources is essential to map the internal and regional driving factors of the conflict, as well as the stakes involved. For both warring parties, gold is the most significant source of income, one which feeds a cross-border network of associated actors including foreign governments, smugglers, other armed groups, and trade partners.

On one hand, the SAF holds the largest gold-producing areas, and relies heavily on them and on the close partnership it holds with United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s companies. On the other hand, HemedE's unparalleled power is underpinned by his personal wealth. His family, one of the richest in the country, managed to seize control of gold mines in most of the Darfur region long before the onset of the war.

Besides, Sudan is cursed with an extremely strategic geographical location: its position between the Suez Canal and the Sahel desert, accompanied by 853km of coastline bordering the Red Sea, make it the perfect stage for great power competition. Administering the country's infrastructure means controlling most of the regional maritime trade routes, hence a significant part of the transit and supply chain of gold, oil and other energy resources.

Needless to say, the vital importance of gold assets and other natural resources as a revenue source is closely tied to the presence of external influences within the country's belligerents. While power struggle dynamics among local actors might have sparked the conflict, intervention of global powers benefiting from the conflict remarkably contributed to its prolongation. Likewise, the possibility of concrete diplomatic solutions to the war has been hindered by the strategic interests these hold in Sudan.

African countries such as Chad, Ethiopia, and Eritrea all profit from instability within the country, and have shown no real intent of mediating. But the actors whose importance in the Sudan territory stands out the most are Egypt, the UAE and Russia.

During the last decade, Russia's foreign policy made intensive diplomatic efforts to deepen its Ees with African countries, with the objective of building strategic partnerships that would underpin its economic and geopolitical interests in the continent. This relationship has been facilitated by the African elites, moved by anti-Western sentiments and goals.

Sudan, with its natural resources and extractive opportunities, has played a critical role in this context. The Wagner group and other Russia-affiliated private military companies have gained control of much of the gold's exports, the profit from which supported operations in the Ukraine war and acted as a transactional currency in response to international sanctions. The Russian government's has therefore been taking advantage of the region's political instability with the purpose of exploiting its natural resources, of-

tentimes through the use of tools such as propaganda campaigns promoting a narrative according to which Russia is supporting African liberation from Western imperialism.

The Kremlin initially developed close ties with the RSF, instrumental for the exploitation of gold mines in the Darfur region. However, the recent developments on the battleground have resulted in a strategic shift, and the federal government has started to support the Sudanese army on a diplomatic and military level by offering logistic support and weapons.

Most of the gold Sudan produces ends in the UAE, which consequently does not benefit from accords between Russia and Sudan. Because the Emirati government constitutes such a strategic gold hub, both parties rely on it for clearing financial transactions. Although the UAE has denied any involvement, Sudan's military government has accused it of supporting the RSF, and refuses to participate in any talks in which it acts a mediator or even a supervisor. Conversely, Egypt has supported al-Burhan's leadership since the beginning of the war.

Further confirming the intricate dynamics which operate behind the scenes of the conflict, Amnesty InternaEonal recently reported that "manufactured weapons and military equipment from countries such as Russia, China, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates are being imported in large quantities into Sudan, and then diverted into Darfur" in the hands of both parties.

The struggle for power between the two Sudanese militias is representative of the way in which domestic and foreign strategic interests have historically shaped the region's geopolitical dynamics. It is necessary that any diplomatic process aimed at reaching a sustainable ceasefire considers the harsh reality of the economic incentives related to the country's strategic commodities.

No long-term solution which neglects the cross-national environment in which the civil war is taking place is likely to prove successful; sanctions will not fundamentally reform the gold supply chain, nor hinder the intensity of the conflict, unless they target the whole ecosystem. The far-reaching goal is that of favouring conflict-free gold markets, possibly by collaborating with Sudanese local authorities towards the development of a responsible gold sector.

Meanwhile, because the state of the mining industry plays such a fundamental role in the possibility of reducing hostilities, it is essential to convince involved regional and international actors that, while they may benefit from Sudan's internal fragmentation and political instability in the short term, their economic and reputational interests would be best secured by an efficient and responsible cooperation with international frameworks.

Given the warring parties' political and economic reliance on UAE, Egypt and Russia, these governments find themselves in a unique position to favour a sustainable ceasefire, considering their pursuit of opposing interests in terms of security and foreign policy within the country risks further

jeopardising their own long-term strategic interests in Sudan and in the broader Horn of Africa region. Egypt, in particular, is in a suitable condition to alleviate the existing enmity between the UAE, a long-running ally, and al-Burhan's government.

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