Sudan War and Geopolitics:A Struggle for Influence

28 NOVEMBER 2025

Hatice Kasap and Lukas Veit



3 Main Points

-Sudan's territory connects the Suez Canal to the Bab el-Mandeb strait, a crucial route in the region. -Wider regional divide regarding political Islam further undermines the possibility for a collective effort towards a ceasefire. -Trade of natural resources with neighbouring and Gulf countries finances the war for the SAF and RSF.-Repeated attempts to broker a peace deal collapsed. This is partly sustained by MENA powers whose competing interests hinder regional constructive cooperation.

About the Authors

3 Main Points

-Sudan's territory connects the Suez Canal to the Bab el-Mandeb strait, a crucial route in the region. -Wider regional divide regarding political Islam further undermines the possibility for a collective effort towards a ceasefire. -Trade of natural resources with neighbouring and Gulf countries finances the war for the SAF and RSF.-Repeated attempts to broker a peace deal collapsed. This is partly sustained by MENA powers whose competing interests hinder regional constructive cooperation.

About the Authors

Hatice Kasap + Lukas Veit

1. Introduction

Satellite images from the Sudanese city of el-Fasher shocked the global community in late October as the world's largest humanitarian crisis is half way into its third year. Since April 2023, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemeti) are fighting an increasingly brutal war. Meanwhile, international mediation initiatives have repeatedly failed to implement peace deals, echoing previous breakdowns of interventions aiming to implement a transitional council following the fall of Omar al-Bashir's government in 2019. Among different factors, the limited capacity of regional governments to cooperate for a ceasefire in Sudan substantially contributes to the continuation of the conflict. This brief analyses Sudan's strategic geopolitical position contributing to regional splits regarding the conflict. It then analyses wartime natural resource appropriation which has further exacerbated the conflict and regional divides, significantly affecting the prospects for a ceasefire.

1.1 Background on the Conflict

Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, former commander in the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemeti), leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), have long been important allies of Bashir's former government. Nevertheless, as the 2019 Sudanese revolution grew stronger, the two men decided to topple Bashir's government as he could no longer sustain uprisings. Following the coup, they led Sudan's Transitional Sovereignty Council with Burhan as president and Hemeti as vice president, despite the general population's dissatisfaction with the two military men. Since then, the question of who rules Sudan is still not answered. Increasing competition between Burhan and Hemeti finally erupted in the ongoing war in April 2023. As the conflict continues, regional actors remain divided in their positions, delaying mediation initiatives, while the situation on the ground continues to fuel a humanitarian disaster.

2. Sudan and Geopolitics in the MENA Region

Sudan occupies a pivotal position in Northeast Africa, combining vast arable land, significant livestock resources, strategic access to the Red Sea, and important mineral wealth, particularly gold. This combination of

geography and resources makes Sudan especially attractive to Gulf states, which rely heavily on food imports and seek to secure resource access and diversification of their economic portfolios away from oil.

Its strategic location at the Red Sea gives Sudan a role in regional maritime security and trade routes connecting the Suez Canal to the Bab el-Mandeb strait, two corridors critical to global commerce as well as access to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. Consequently, Sudan is more than a fragile African state: it has become a chessboard where external powers seek influence, both for economic and regional leverage. The war can be regarded as "deeply geopolitical," shaped by external actors pursuing long-term strategic interests.

2.1 The Saudi – UAE Rivalry in the War

While both Saudi Arabia and the UAE share interests in Sudan, their approaches diverge substantively, leading to a rivalry that has helped fuel, rather than defuse, the conflict. Early after the ouster of former ruler, Omar al-Bashir, both powers provided substantial financial support to Sudan's new authorities.

However, as the civil war erupted in April 2023 between the SAF and the RSF, the Gulf states' diverging ambitions sharpened. The UAE reportedly began backing the RSF, a move aimed at ensuring influence over Sudan's gold exports, agricultural zones, and possibly securing strategic footholds on the Red Sea. By contrast, Saudi Arabia has assumed a more mediatory posture, seeking to position itself as a regional peacemaker and leading regional power in a scenario of political settlement. Thus, what might have been a unified and meaningful Gulf response has fractured, turning Sudan into a proxy arena for intra-Gulf competition.

3. The Role of Political Islam Inside the Conflict: Diverging Perspectives

A central, though often under-discussed, dimension of the Gulf rivalry is the question of Political Islam, especially the role of Islamist movements in Sudan's future. Since the aftermath of the Arab Spring, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have strongly opposed the rise of Political Islam as a force for participatory governance, seeing it as a threat to their autocratic and highly centralised governance models. The UAE has pursued a hardline strategy of suppressing Islamist participation, which partly explains its support for the RSF as a counterweight to Islamist-leaning networks within the SAF. Saudi Arabia shares this general suspicion of Political Islam, yet remains more pragmatic. Given that Riyadh strongly favours the institutional continuity provided by the SAF, it appears that it's prioritising state stability and controlled political arrangements over outright ideological exclusion.

By contrast, other regional actors, notably Qatar, Turkey, and Iran, perceive political Islam as a legitimate instrument of influence. Qatar and Turkey have long-standing ties to Muslim Brotherhood-linked networks in Sudan and traditionally support the political integration of Islamist actors, seeing them as vehicles for post-authoritarian governance rather than as existential threats. Turkey has reportedly provided military and logistical

support to the SAF, strengthening forces that maintain links to Islamist constituencies. Iran, meanwhile, has re-emerged as a strategic backer of the SAF through drone supplies and security cooperation, viewing Sudan as an opportunity to expand its Red Sea footprint and reinforce Islamist-military alliances against Gulf dominance.

This ideological polarisation deepens the conflict by transforming Sudan into a battleground not only over power and resources, but also over the legitimacy of Political Islam in the post-war order. A settlement that empowers Islamist-aligned civilian or military forces would likely realign Sudan towards Qatar, Turkey and possibly Iran. A scenario strongly resisted by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. As a result, competing foreign policies vis-à-vis Political Islam continue to undermine unified mediation efforts and complicate the prospects for a stable and inclusive political transition.

4. Resources at War: Gold, Oil, and Agri-Business

Sudan's rich endowment of natural resources attracts more than local players. The country has continued to export rare minerals and agricultural products to neighbouring and Gulf countries. Experts argue rents from resources have significantly funded the war and military equipment.

Among the country's various resources, gold stands out as particularly critical in the funding of the war, as both the SAF and RSF control different gold mines and trade it with regional powers to fund their military expenses. The UAE has particularly stood out as the number one buyer of Sudanese gold from the RSF. Egypt's gold market is also an alleged ground for the smuggling of Sudanese gold, mostly from the SAF, which the Egyptian government has shown support for. These two countries' involvement, along with other regional states, lead to further fragmentation in Sudan and the strengthening of opposing factions in the conflict, ultimately prolonging the war. Moreover, the importance of gold as an asset of war has led to the targeting of gold mines and mine workers on the ground, intensifying the effects of war in gold-rich regions even more. The competition for gold is more than an economic strive, but a tool for political leverage on the international stage shaping the conflict's future.

Although less discussed, trade of agricultural goods and livestock are other flows financing warfare. Sudan supplies 80% of the global market's Gum Arabica, a critical ingredient in a variety of both food and cosmetic products. Meanwhile, its export of livestock generated an estimated value of USD 715 million in 2023 alone, marked by large volumes of exports to Saudi Arabia, followed by Egypt, both allegedly backing the SAF. This fuels competition for control over trade routes to Port Sudan between the SAF and RSF, with important effects on communities in these zones whose properties are often seized by either faction. Furthermore, the RSF also targeted pastoralists and livestock in its attacks to decrease trade of these goods with foreign buyers. Communal disputes and division have inevitably escalated in affected populations due to competition for livelihood as famine and food insecurity spread. Paradoxically, the export of agricultural

goods and livestock is a critical source of revenue for Sudan's war, while hunger spreads throughout the country.

5. Prospects for Peace

The involvement of Gulf actors in ceasefire and peace initiatives highlights the war's regional dimensions. Outside backings have altered the conflict's trajectory substantively. The UAE's alleged support for the RSF, including supplying weapons and facilitating gold trade, has helped sustain its fighting capacity, despite heavy international condemnation. These external sponsorships complicated any settlement of the conflict, which consequently prolonged fighting and the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

Saudi-led mediation efforts, such as those in Jeddah in May 2023, have attempted to broker a ceasefire and political roadmap. Yet, these efforts have repeatedly failed, in part because each Gulf actor seeks to protect its own strategic interest: for the UAE, ensuring the RSF retains leverage, for Saudi Arabia, preserving its role as mediator and positioning itself as a potential future regional hegemon. The different Saudi and Emirati agendas complicate, and may well undermine, prospects for a durable ceasefire or negotiated settlement.

Recent developments also show a sharp setback for the Quad mediation in Sudan, comprising the US, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE, it seeks to broker a ceasefire and revive a civilian transition. On November 24th, SAF-head of military, al-Burhan, rejected the proposed truce, arguing that it would weaken the national army while effectively legitimising the RSF. Central to his refusal is the role of the UAE within the Quad, which SAF accuses of backing the RSF and thus lacking neutrality. While the RSF signalled openness to a humanitarian pause, the army demanded prior RSF withdrawals and firm security guarantees. In response, the UAE's minister of state for international cooperation, Reem bint Ebrahim Al Hashimy, accused al-Burhan of "obstructive behaviour".

Meanwhile Sudan's resource-driven political economy also poses significant obstacles to any sustainable ceasefire. Some experts have suggested a certification mechanism on certain products coming from Sudan while others proposed stricter deterrence measures for the trade of illicit products funding the war. Both the SAF and RSF rely heavily on rents from natural resources to fund their military operations, these sectors have become deeply embedded in the conflict. Control over gold mines and smuggling routes creates strong incentives for the warring parties to maintain territorial dominance rather than concede ground in negotiations. Similarly, these same processes sustain violence that directly undermines ceasefire efforts. As long as outside actors continue to back opposing factions, both sides have little material incentive to halt hostilities. Consequently, the resource economy not only prolongs the war but structurally constrains the conditions under which a credible ceasefire could emerge.

6. Conclusion

The war in Sudan, now deep into its third year, has evolved into one of the world's most severe yet politically neglected humanitarian catastrophes. Repeated attempts to broker a ceasefire have collapsed, not only because of deep mistrust between the SAF and RSF, but also due to the structural war economy that rewards continued fighting and undermines incentives for compromise. This deadlock is partly sustained by the interventions of MENA powers whose competing geopolitical, ideological, and economic interests have transformed Sudan into a proxy arena where peace is subordinated to strategic leverage.

As long as these external actors continue to shield and bankroll the two rivaling factions, prospects for de-escalation will remain severely constrained. Achieving a credible ceasefire therefore requires not only pressure on Sudan's belligerents but also a coordinated regional and international strategy that curbs foreign military support, regulates conflict-linked resource flows, and re-centres civilian protection and political transition as the only viable path to stability.

EPIS