Sudan's Civil War

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Vittoria Giudice



By Vittoria Giudice

In April 2023, Khartoum became the epicentre of a brutal civil war, transforming Sudan into a battleground for regional influence. Among the foreign actors involved, the United Arab Emirates has emerged as a key player, driven by its ambitions to expand power and control across the Middle East and Africa. The UAE sees resource-rich and strategically located Sudan as a crucial opportunity to entrench its influence in East Africa and the broader region.

The two principal parties involved in this conflict are the military government of Sudan, represented by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The SAF has expressed

support for Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, the de facto ruler who assumed power following the 2019 removal of the long-standing dictator Omar al-Bashir. The RSF also referred to as the Janjaweed, is led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti. This conflict has turned Sudan into a pivotal arena for external actors, notably the UAE, which holds substantial interests in determining the outcome.

What, then, drives the UAE's Engagement in Sudan?

The UAE's involvement in Sudan reveals its complex strategic and economic motivations. Abu Dhabi's assistance to the RSF, despite public denial, includes support through logistical networks in neighbouring countries like Libya, Chad, and Uganda, through the well-known mercenary Wagner Group, which has been active in Sudan since 2017. This multifaceted support suggests a calculated approach to shaping the conflict's trajectory in line with the UAE's broader regional ambitions.

Economic and Strategic Interests

One of the most apparent motivations behind the UAE's involvement is Sudan's abundance of natural resources. The considerable gold deposits in Sudan have long been a source of interest for Abu Dhabi, which is the primary importer of gold. Since 2018, the UAE has made investments in the country amounting to over US$6 billion, including contributions to Sudanese foreign reserves, agricultural projects, and the construction of a port along the Red Sea. Abu Dhabi has faced accusations of engaging in the illicit smuggling of gold, with most of it ultimately destined for Russia. This economic interest is protected and secured by alliances that control critical gold mines, often with the help of Wagner contractors.

These investments are far more than economic ventures; they are a deliberate means of expanding the UAE's influence in Sudan. By controlling key sectors such as gold, agriculture and infrastructure, Abu Dhabi is positioning itself as a major player in Sudan's economy. This control generates considerable wealth and creates a dependency that ties Sudan's economy directly to UAE interests. In doing so, the UAE is also strengthening its ties with other global powers such as Russia.

Sudan's geographical location as a critical transit point between the Middle East and Africa adds another dimension to the UAE's involvement. The development of a port on the Red Sea, a region of great importance to global trade, is intended to exert influence over maritime trade. In doing so, the UAE is not only strengthening its economic position but also creating a potential choke point to control trade flows.

Rivalry with Saudi Arabia

Sudan is also a battleground in the existing rivalry between the UAE and Saudi Arabia. While Abu Dhabi supports the RSF, Riyadh and Egypt have aligned themselves with the SAF and Al-Burhan. This rivalry underscores a broader power struggle between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, which has been

marked by both cooperation and competition over the years. In recent years, Riyadh has sought to establish itself as a financial hub and leading regional actor, improving relations with Iran and acting as a mediator in Lebanon, Syria and facilitating dialogue between opposing Palestinian factions, as well as reducing Abu Dhabi's regional influence, undermining the UAE's position in oil and gas transportation in Yemen and gaining greater control within OPEC. The UAE's support for the RSF, in direct opposition to the Saudi-backed forces, indicates a deliberate effort by Abu Dhabi to counter Riyadh's influence in Sudan and the wider region. This rivalry is not just about Sudan, it is emblematic of a wider struggle for regional dominance between these two Gulf powers.

The UAE's Gains, Sudan's Losses

As the UAE pursues its strategic and economic objectives in Sudan, the human cost has been immense. Over 18,800 people have been killed, 33,000 injured, and more than 10 million displaced in the 16 months since the conflict began. Over half of Sudan's population—25.6 million people—are now facing acute hunger, with over two million seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. While the conflict continues, its ultimate resolution remains undetermined. While the population bears the brunt of the conflict, the UAE supports the RSF and its 'horrific' ethnically motivated attacks against non-Arab Sudanese in the Darfur region. It's clear that the UAE is prioritising its own strategic interests rather than genuinely working to end the conflict or considering its wider implications for Sudan.

The deep strategic partnership between the UAE and Russia should also not be underestimated, as the Kremlin seeks to increase its influence in Africa and challenge the Western presence. Sudan, like other scenarios, represents a strategic foothold to expand Russia's geopolitical reach, regional trade, and military positioning. This growing influence of external powers requires a strategic and coordinated response from Europe – not only to safeguard its own economic and security interests but also to prevent the erosion of sovereignty and stability in key regions of Africa. In an increasingly interconnected world, Sudan's fate is in many ways intertwined with our own future.