THE WAR IN SUDAN

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1. Introduction

The outbreak of large-scale conflict in Sudan in April 2023 has rapidly emerged as one of the most pressing humanitarian and geopolitical crises of the present decade. What began as a confrontation between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti"), has escalated into full-scale war involving intense urban combat, mass displacement, and economic disintegration (De Waal, 2019). Nearly 13 million people have been forced to flee their homes, while infrastructure and essential services have collapsed under the weight of sustained violence and governance breakdown (UNHCR, 2024b).

Although the origins of the conflict are deeply rooted in Sudan's domestic political economy, particularly the militarization of elite competition and the legacy of authoritarian rule, external actors have played a critical role in shaping the course and intensity of the war. Countries such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and various Western powers have influenced the conflict through arms transfers, financial backing, diplomatic mediation, and control over economic networks (Makonye, 2023). Sudan has thus become a central arena in which regional rivalries and international power struggles are being contested through indirect engagement.

This article examines the war in Sudan by placing it in a broader comparative context, focusing on how authoritarian regimes collapse, how ruling elites become divided, and how foreign powers become involved through proxy dynamics. After the fall of Omar al-Bashir in 2019, there was hope for a transition to civilian rule (Berridge et al., 2022). However, weak transitional institutions and the continued influence of armed networks tied to political elites led to an unstable and competitive political system, often described as a political marketplace (De Waal, 2019). Using neo-realist theory and the political marketplace approach, this article argues that Sudan follows a pattern seen in other countries after authoritarian collapse, where the breakdown of state authority allows foreign actors to intervene

and transforms internal power struggles into conflicts shaped by regional rivalries.

2. Historical Background

The roots of the conflict run deep in decades of authoritarian rule, elite fragmentation, and resource struggles. For thirty years, Omar al-Bashir governed through a hybrid system that blended military power, Islamist ideology, and patronage networks. Political authority was less a result of institutions and more of personal connections, violence, and control over resources (Hassan & Kodouda, 2019).

During al-Bashir's rule, the Sudanese state heavily relied on coercive paramilitary forces, especially in peripheral regions like Darfur. The RSF trace their origins to the Janjaweed militias, which were mobilized by the regime to suppress rebellions in Darfur and to serve as proxies in contested regions (Kurtz, 2024). Over time, the RSF gained economic autonomy, controlling gold mines and trade routes (Kurtz, 2024; Abdelrahman, 2025). The government, after losing oil revenue through South Sudan's secession in 2011, pushed gold as a substitute source of revenue, however this opened opportunities for militarized actors to profit (Abdelrahman, 2025; Patey 2024). Meanwhile, tensions between the civilian and military components of the government deepened over how quickly reforms should take place and who would lead the transition once elections arrived.

By early 2023, the uneasy power balance between the SAF and the RSF had reached a breaking point. Months of stalled negotiations over the integration of the RSF into the national army revealed deep mistrust between General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. Both sides began deploying troops across Khartoum and other strategic areas, including Merowe in the north, in a tense standoff that the transitional authorities and foreign mediators could no longer contain (Assal, 2023).

On 15 April 2023, open fighting erupted in Khartoum after RSF units seized key military installations and airports (Abdelaziz & Eltahir, 2023). Within hours, the confrontation escalated into one of the most destructive wars in Sudan's modern history (Ibrahim et al., 2024). The conflict quickly spread to Darfur, Kordofan, and other regions, exposing the fragile governance and fragmented security landscape of the country. "As of March 2025, only 16% of primary healthcare centers, 14% of hospitals, and 40% of sentinel surveillance sites remaining operational" (Alsoukhni et al., 2025, p. 2). The violence not only reflected an internal power struggle but also the structural failure of Sudan's transitional process, which had left competing armed elites entrenched within parallel economic and political systems (Assal, 2023).

3. External Engagement

The war that erupted in Sudan in April 2023 has drawn in a wide range of regional and global actors whose political, economic, and security interests have shaped the conflict's trajectory. Although the confrontation between the SAF and the RSF is rooted in domestic rivalries, external engagement has amplified and prolonged the conflict.

Egypt has become a key ally of the SAF. Cairo's support is rooted in long-standing military cooperation and its concern for Nile Basin security, especially in relation to developments in Ethiopia. Egypt perceives Sudan's stability as crucial to its own water security and regional influence (Maher & Farid, 2025). In addition, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) plays a prominent economic role. Soliman & Baldo (2025) identify Sudan's gold sector as a critical revenue source for the RSF and notes that many gold exports pass through networks linked to the UAE. Moreover, investigations by Amnesty International have documented weapons transfers via the UAE to the RSF, in breach of international arms embargoes (Amnesty International, 2025). Saudi Arabia has sought a mediating role, most notably hosting the Jeddah talks aimed at civilian protection, thus balancing regional dynamics while pursuing its interest in Red Sea and Horn of Africa stability (Gabriel, 2025; Kiros, 2024). Neighboring states such as Chad and South Sudan have borne the humanitarian and security spill-over, dealing with massive refugee flows and cross-border instability (UNHCR, 2024a).

The United States and the European Union have implemented sanctions and provided humanitarian assistance, yet their leverage appears limited compared with regional actors who engage more directly (Jost, 2024). Russia, and particularly the paramilitary network of the Wagner Group, has secured access to gold-mining concessions in Sudan and has supported factional actors thereby shaping the conflict through economic and security channels (Doxsee 2023; Larsen & Wivel, 2025). The United Nations remains focused on humanitarian coordination and monitoring (United Nations, 2024), but the multiplicity of external actors complicates any unified diplomatic solution.

In summary, Sudan's war has shifted from being a purely internal conflict to one that is regionalized and internationalized. External actors intervene through gold markets, arms transfers, and diplomatic initiatives, thereby sustaining and influencing the conflict even while publicly advocating for peace. This entanglement of resource leverage, geopolitical competition, and fragmented state authority makes the conflict particularly resistant to resolution.

4. Theoretical Lenses

A neo-realist reading treats Sudan's war as a proxy arena shaped by regional security dilemmas and the pursuit of relative gains. In neo-realism, the international system is anarchic, states prioritize survival, and power balanc-

ing produces competitive behavior rather than reliable collective security (Waltz, 2010). Applied to Sudan, the alignments of Egypt with the SAF and of Gulf economic networks with RSF funding reflect strategic calculation over Nile security, Red Sea access, and regional influence rather than principled commitments to Sudanese governance. These dynamics are documented in analyses that trace how external patrons and markets have conditioned the conflict's incentives and raised the cost of de-escalation for domestic elites (International Crisis Group, 2025). From this perspective, Sudan's conflict appears not as an isolated civil war but as a predictable result of regional power competition in an increasingly multipolar setting.

A complementary perspective is the political marketplace approach. Rather than seeing authority as institutional and rule-bound, this framework conceptualizes governance as a transactional market in which elites buy and sell loyalties with cash, coercion, and access to resource rents (World Peace Foundation, 2025). In Sudan, armed entrepreneurs developed parallel revenue bases in gold and cross-border trade, which sustained the autonomy of coercive organizations and eroded the monopoly of violence needed for institutional reform (De Waal, 2019). Thomas and De Waal (2022) show how wartime hunger and aid access are also mediated by these monetized patronage networks, making humanitarian outcomes contingent on pricing political loyalties rather than enforcing impersonal rules. Read together, neo-realism explains why external actors compete in Sudan, while the political marketplace framework explains why that competition is absorbed domestically through cashable loyalties rather than institutional bargains.

4.1. Comparative perspective: Libya after 2011

A useful comparison offers Libya after 2011. After the fall of Muammar al-Gaddafi, rival coalitions consolidated armed fiefdoms and sought external sponsors (Lacher, 2020). Over the 2019/2020 Tripoli campaign and beyond, Turkey, Egypt UAE, and Russia backed opposing coalitions with advisors, drones, and financing, while local commanders converted territorial control into negotiating leverage rather than institutional power building (International Crisis Group, 2020). The result was enduring fragmentation, institutional duality, and a stalled transition despite repeated diplomatic tracks. This pattern mirrors Sudan where external patrons amplify domestic rivalries, and elites transact power through marketized coercion rather than through state reform. Cross-case, the implication is that peace initiatives falter when regional balancing meets political marketplaces that reward continued fragmentation over credible commitments to institutional consolidation.

5. Conclusion

Sudan's ongoing conflict reveals how the breakdown of an entrenched regime can blur the boundary between domestic collapse and regional competition. The country's failed transition replaced one system of coercive control with another, leaving political authority fragmented among rival military and paramilitary elites. At the same time, external powers have pursued their own strategic and economic agendas by aligning with competing factions rather than supporting a unified diplomatic framework. The interplay between these internal fractures and external rivalries has deepened the crisis, turning a domestic struggle for power into a protracted regional confrontation that continues to obstruct any meaningful path toward stabilization.

Furthermore, the persistence of Sudan's war reflects the limitations of contemporary international mediation. While efforts such as the Jeddah talks have sought to halt violence and protect civilians, they have largely treated the conflict as a political dispute among elites rather than as a symptom of deeper structural decay. Humanitarian interventions, though vital, remain disconnected from the political economy of war that sustains both the SAF and the RSF through control of gold, trade routes, and foreign financing. As a result, ceasefires have repeatedly collapsed because the incentives for war continue to outweigh those for compromise. In a broader sense, Sudan's trajectory exemplifies the fragility of post-authoritarian transitions in regions where power is personalized, institutions are weak, and external actors compete for influence.

Ultimately, Sudan's conflict demonstrates the limits of externally driven state-building in a multipolar order where regional powers pursue overlapping but incompatible agendas. Durable peace will depend not only on negotiations among armed elites but also on constraining the transnational political marketplace that sustains them. This requires coordinated regulation of gold exports, enforcement of arms embargoes, and the reintegration of civilian actors into political processes that have long been monopolized by military and economic networks. Any sustainable peace in Sudan will require more than a redistribution of power among armed elites. It depends on dismantling the networks that link violence to profit, restoring civilian authority, and aligning regional diplomacy with genuine support for political reconstruction rather than proxy competition. In sum, Sudan is not an isolated failure of transition, but a warning sign of how regionalized authoritarian collapses can reproduce conflict economies when global governance remains divided.

Resources

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