



Nuru series : The underlying causes of conflicts

Sudan War : a guide to understanding the “world’s worst humanitarian crisis”

Introduction

On January 12th, 2025, the Financial Times, a British Newspaper, published an article on the war in Sudan, describing it as **“the largest state to collapse in modern history and the largest displacement crisis in the world today”**, and the country is expected to see the “worst famine in Africa in 100 years”. The media’s statement seems a good place to analyse the situation in the country today, as it addresses both the **state of governance on the territory, and the lack thereof**, as well as the consequences of the conflict on civilians, which remain the main victims of a war often described as *General’s war*. Isn’t this terminology ill-fitting in the context of a war that has brought millions to displacement, and killed thousands ? This article strives to understand the **roots of the conflict in Sudan, and to avoid the simplification implied by the idea of the *General’s war***. In order to better grasp how this conflict is destroying a territory ten-times the size of the United Kingdom, a deeper dive into its history, as well as its economic structure, and political path, not without ignoring the geopolitical and diplomatic ties of the belligerents, is needed.

Key Notions

Sudan, areas of control

At May 23rd 2024

■ RSF ■ SAF ■ Militias and rebel groups



Source : The Economist

When, and where ?

The war broke out in **April 2023**, in the capital city of Khartoum. It later spread to other areas of the country, though Khartoum has remained the main fighting area. According to ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data, NGO), **Khartoum has seen 54 percent of all recorded incidents**. The Kordofan (southern region) area has also seen a lot of attacks, similar to the Darfur region.

Who ?

Two main actors have been fighting for the past 2 years, the **Sudanese Armed Forces (military force of the country)**, and the **Rapid Support Forces (paramilitary force)**, created in 2013. The first is led by the general **Abdel Fattah Al Burhan**, and the second by **Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo**, also known and referred to through this text as *Hemedti*.

How many ?

Sudan remains the largest displacement crisis and food emergency globally, with over **11 million people displaced** and facing acute hunger. More than **28 000 people have been killed**.

Economic, geographic and political specificities of the country



Source : Africa Guide

Sudan straddles North, Central and the Horn of Africa, with a **650km of Red Sea coastline** and is endowed with **natural resources**. The country is composed of 18 states.

It has a population of around **49 million people**, half of which are today in need of basic humanitarian aid.

In terms of economic resources, the country is **one of the biggest agricultural producer in the region**, and has the potential to become its breadbasket. Another key **resource is gold**, which has been one of the **main drivers of the Sudan conflict**, as it allows both parties to fuel their war machines. As a matter of fact, much of the economy remains largely in the hands of security and business elites, that are linked to both the RSF, and the SAF.

The importance of gold

The reason why the gold sector has been so much on the rise is partly because of the **partition with South Sudan in 2011**, which led to Sudan losing most of their oil exports, and **gold becoming an important resource of foreign exchange**. The gold industry is more fuelled by **artisanal smallscale mining**, than it is by heavy industrial operations. In terms of the companies operating on the territory, they are both **sudanese and foreign**, the first being largely dominated by **military and security related companies that use gold as a source of hard currency**.



Source : Revue conflits

Figuring out the “why” by looking at history

Since its independence in **1956**, Sudan has been plagued by **internal strife, political unrest, and economic instability**. Emerging from the Anglo-Egyptian condominium, the newly independent government sought to establish an Arab and Islamic identity, marginalizing many of its diverse ethnic and religious communities. This exclusion **sowed seeds of division that have persisted through decades**. Sudan is home to 19 major ethnic groups and 597 subgroups, with Sudanese Arabs comprising approximately 70% of the population. The ethnic boundaries which had been blurred over centuries, **reemerged during periods of conflict, and were exacerbated by political strategies**.

The **war in Darfur**, for example, had for one of its root causes the neglect of the region by the central government, feeding frustration from the local population, and leading to conflict.

The country's struggle for unity is highlighted by the two civil wars it hosted, which are **among the longest in African history**. The **First Sudanese Civil War** (1955–1972) erupted due to southern demands for autonomy, highlighting regional disparities. This was followed by **the Second Sudanese Civil War** (1983–2005), which not only underscored tensions between the northern Arab-Muslim elite and marginalized southern and peripheral communities but also **led to the secession of South Sudan in 2011**.

Omar Al-Bashir's rule of the country and its consequences



Omar Al-Bashir

Sudan's contemporary crisis stems from the legacy of Omar Al-Bashir, who seized power in 1989 through a coup orchestrated by the National Islamic Front. Al-Bashir's 30-year regime imposed a **restrictive interpretation of Sharia law**, dissolved democratic institutions, and centralized power in Khartoum. To maintain control, **Al-Bashir empowered the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)**, led by **Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti)**, an evolution of the Janjaweed militia that perpetrated crimes in Darfur. **Mass protests in 2018 against inflation and corruption culminated in Al-Bashir's removal in April 2019, replaced by a transitional government.**

That year, **a coup** was carried jointly by the **Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF)** under the leadership of **Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan**, and the **RSF militia, led by Hemedti** - which were originally given power to by Al Bashir-. Following the coup and the end of the Bashir era, **an agreement was reached with the intervention of the African Union**, resulting in the creation of a **military-civilian transitional government**, the **Transitional Military Council**. On April 12th, 2019, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Hemedti are left to rule the country as head, and deputy head of the Transitional military council. After a wave of protests for the return of civilian rule, **Prime minister Abdallah Hamdok was sworn in, but he stepped down in 2022**. From then on and until the beginning of the war, Al Burhan was head of State. The power struggle between **General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan**, leader of the **Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF)**, and **Hemedti** erupted into the full-scale conflict we know today on April 15, 2023.



Abdallah Hamdok

The war in Darfur

The war in **Darfur broke in 2003**, and would later be condemned as a **genocide against non-arab populations** such as the Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit people in western Sudan by the ICC and the US State department.



Source : Oxfam

Burhan vs. Hemedti: a mere power struggle ?

The analysis of the ongoing war centers on the **rivalry between al-Burhan's SAF and Hemedti's RSF**. While the **SAF claims broader national representation**, the **RSF is rooted in Sudanese Arab networks**, often recruiting from marginalized communities in Darfur. Funded by gold mining and supported by external actors like the UAE and Russia's Wagner Group, the RSF's structure amplifies the economic and ethnic tensions fueling the conflict. **Darfur has once again become a focal point, with atrocities against non-Arab groups by RSF-aligned militias**. Accusations of **ethnic cleansing, particularly targeting the Masalit community, have drawn international condemnation**. Both the SAF and RSF face accusations of **war crimes**, deepening the humanitarian crisis. The two sides have been fighting over legitimacy, and whom should be in power, **which led to think the war was only one of two men fighting over one seat**. The supports of the both parties, however, show that the struggle is **deeper-rooted in geopolitical alliances**.

SUDANESE ARMED FORCES

The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF)

The **SAF is led by General Abdel Fattah Al Burhan**. It has alliances with **various militias**, including the **Zaghawa militias** in Darfur. The SAF is representative of Sudan's population, drawing recruits from various ethnic groups.

Economic and Military Support

The SAF is supported by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. **Iran has provided military aid**, with reports of at least nine cargo flights supplying arms to the SAF between December 2024 and July 2025. Iran has been **sending drones to the SAF, countering the influence of other powers, such as the UAE**.

The SAF controls over **200 commercial companies**, with investments in gold mining, agriculture, rubber production, and meat exports. Its arsenal consists of Chinese, Russian, Soviet-era, and domestically produced weapons. Sudan's defense industry is among the largest in Africa.

Role in the Conflict

The SAF **fancies itself as Sudan's legitimate government** but is **highly dependent on external support from Iran, Russia, and Egypt**, which face their own geopolitical challenges. It has been accused of **blocking life-saving humanitarian aid**, exacerbating **famine** conditions in Sudan.



RAPID SUPPORT FORCES

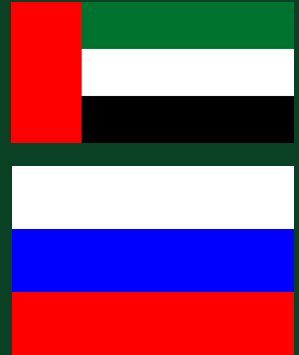
Leadership and Structure:

The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) emerged from the **Janjaweed militia**, an Arab-majority paramilitary group originally funded by former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir to fight rebels and exert control over Darfur. The RSF is led by Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, also known as "Hemedti." **It recruits from various warlord groups and community alliances to strengthen its numbers.**



Economic and Military Support:

Funded primarily through **gold mining in Darfur and financial backing from the UAE and Russia**, until 2024 when the Kremlin directed the course of its support towards the SAF. The UAE has reportedly invested over \$6 billion in Sudan and has been accused of providing weapons to the RSF under the guise of humanitarian aid. The RSF **has financial networks linked to front companies and banks in Sudan and the UAE**, including the Al Junaid company, which is **connected to Hemedti's family**. Russia, through the Wagner Group (Africa Corps), has provided military and logistical support via bases in Libya.



Role in the Conflict:

The RSF controls **large parts of Darfur and key economic assets**, particularly in the gold sector. It has been accused of **severe human rights violations**, including **genocidal violence and war crimes**. The US sanctioned Hemedti in September 2023 for human rights abuses and **imposed sanctions on Sudan's RSF on January 7th 2025**, citing genocide. The sanctions target the RSF leader for his role in **"systematic atrocities"**. He is banned from traveling to the U.S. and conducting transactions with U.S. entities. The RSF denies harming civilians, blaming rogue elements.

Regional Implications: Chad and South Sudan

Sudan's instability has profound regional repercussions. Chad, sharing a 1,300-km border with Sudan, is grappling with an influx of over 700,000 refugees, primarily from Darfur. This strain exacerbates poverty and tensions between Arab and non-Arab communities. Armed groups and militias in Chad are reportedly crossing into Sudan, further complicating the conflict. For South Sudan, the war disrupts vital oil exports that rely on Sudanese pipelines to reach international markets. South Sudan's economy, heavily reliant on oil revenues, faces severe setbacks, risking further destabilization.

Peace process and talks

The peace process in Sudan has faced significant challenges despite multiple international efforts. Various diplomatic initiatives, including the Jeddah Process (led by Saudi Arabia and the U.S.) and the Geneva talks (co-hosted by Saudi Arabia and Switzerland since August 2024), aim to broker a ceasefire. However, a lack of coordination among multiple peace efforts—such as those by the African Union (AU), Egypt, the UAE, and IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development)—has complicated progress. There has been in Sudan, at least 16 failed ceasefires.

Jeddah Process

The Jeddah Process refers to a mediation effort initiated in May 2023 by the United States and Saudi Arabia to address the conflict. This initiative led to the signing of the Jeddah Declaration, in which both parties committed to allowing unrestricted humanitarian access, preventing attacks on non-combatants, and protecting civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, from military occupation. However, these commitments were rapidly violated by both sides, leading the mediators to suspend the talks.



Source : Anadolu Ajansi



Source : Anadolu Ajansi

Geneva talks

Building on the Jeddah Process, these talks have invited RSF and SAF representatives to attend, with the United Nations, African Union, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates as observers. Despite these efforts, the proliferation of peace processes has allowed the warring parties to "forum-shop," seeking favorable terms while the humanitarian crisis in Sudan intensifies. The initial attempt at mediation was the May 2023 Saudi-US process, which led to unsuccessful negotiations in Geneva in August 2024.

Conclusion

Sudan's ongoing conflict is a stark reminder of the **dangers of unresolved grievances and power struggles**. Beyond the devastating human toll, the war threatens to destabilize an already fragile region. **A military resolution remains unlikely, regardless of which side claims victory**. War crimes have been committed by both the SAF and RSF, and civilians continue to bear the brunt of the violence. Even if one faction prevails, Sudan risks long-term instability and deep scars that could take generations to heal. This underscores the urgent need for a **strong transitional justice system, fair reconstruction efforts, and genuine reconciliation in a country long fractured by divisions**.

To prevent further disintegration, the immediate priority must be protecting what remains and fostering consensus. Restoring a legitimate government with a monopoly on force—free from external interference and arms inflows—is essential, as highlighted by the Financial Times. Meanwhile, local Sudanese communities, as noted by the UN, have organized grassroots emergency response efforts to support families despite targeted violence against civil society. These local initiatives must be safeguarded and strengthened to pave the way for sustainable peace.

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NURU Intelligence Institute

EXPANDING HORIZONS OF AFRICAN GEOPOLITICS



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