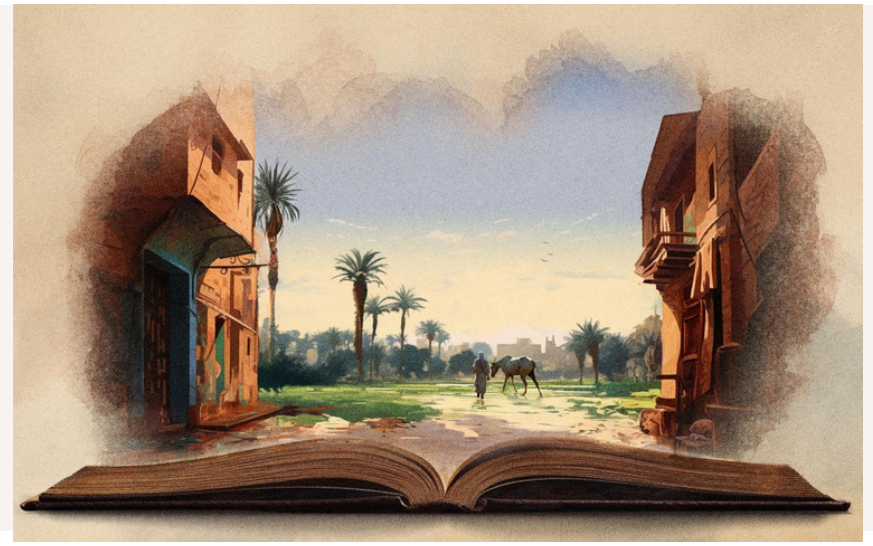
INSIGHT · DISCOURSE · ACTION

CDRC Digest

July 2026 Vol. 10 No. 6 Special Edition



CDRC is a non-profit, independent Ethiopia-based policy institute engaged in research and analysis. The Centre looks at opportunities and key challenges in the Horn of Africa, and focuses on policy ideas on development, sustainable peace and security.

The CDRC Digest is the Centre's monthly publication, endeavoring to provide an African perspective on political, economic and social developments as well as mechanisms of sustaining peace and security in the Horn of Africa, the African continent and beyond. The publication is based on dialogue, rigorous research and analysis.

Contents

A monthly publication of the Centre for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation (CDRC), in partnership with the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Ethiopia

CDRC Digest Team:

Abdeta Dribssa Beyene, Ph.D (Executive Director)
Amb. Kasahun Dender (Deputy Executive Director)
Wegene Mengistu (Senior Researcher)
Yidnekachew Mitiku Ph.D (Senior Researcher)

Centre for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation
Ethio-China Friendship Avenue
Medina Tower 5th floor
Tel: +251 11 470 0370/73
Fax: +251 11 470 0359
Email: cdrc@cdrcethiopia.com
http://www.cdrcethiopia.org

Sudan - Closing the Chapter of Missed Opportunities

By Endrias Amanuel*

Introduction

Sudan, once Africa's largest country prior to South Sudan's independence in 2011, has endured decades of internal conflict rooted in entrenched ethnic, religious, and economic cleavages. A succession of missed opportunities to address the grievances of its diverse societal groups- compounded by elite rivalries and recurrent political failures- has pushed the country into its gravest crisis to date. A thorough examination of Sudan's colonial and post-colonial trajectory is essential to understanding these dynamics. This includes the growth of Islamic political movements that eroded the foundations of an evolving pluralistic Sudan capable of managing its diversity, and the entrenchment of a state marked by center-periphery differences.

In this setting, extractive political and economic systems concentrated power and wealth in the center while marginalizing the peripheries but extracting resources from them. As these peripheral actors increasingly assert control over resources and political authority, longstanding linkages have fractured, reshaping the balance of power. Taken together, these historical and structural factors are indispensable for understanding Sudan's contemporary political dynamics, its persistent internal tensions, and the enduring challenges to its cohesion as a unified state.

Historical Background

Origins and State Formation

From 1899 until its independence in 1956, Sudan was administered under Anglo-Egyptian rule, a period that entrenched ethnic and religious divisions between the predominantly Arab and Muslim populations of the north and the largely non-Arab, Christian, and animist communities of the south. Following independence, successive governments failed to recognize Sudan's diversity and effectively manage this diversity, allowing unresolved grievances to persist and contributing to recurrent conflicts over political power and economic resources.

On February 12, 1953, Egypt and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland signed an agreement providing for self-government and self-determination in Sudan. The agreement stipulated a transitional period not to "exceed three years". The 1956 Transitional Constitution amended and built upon this framework, preserving its core principles while marking Sudan's transition to full sovereignty.

The constitution established Sudan as a parliamentary system and provided for an autonomous judiciary. It also enshrined fundamental rights and freedoms, including protection against arbitrary arrest and deprivation of property; guarantees of freedom of religion, opinion, and association; the right to constitutional remedy; judicial independence; and adherence to the rule of law.

The legislature consisted of an elected House of Representatives and a Senate representing the regions, together responsible for law-making, budget approval, and oversight of the executive. Executive authority rested with a Council of Ministers led by a Prime Minister drawn from the parliamentary majority. The cabinet was collectively accountable to Parliament, including through votes of no confidence. Yet the newly

* *Endrias Amanuel is a communications, research, and project management professional specializing in governance, diplomacy, international development, and humanitarian affairs, with experience across government, NGOs, research institutes, and international organizations.*

elected transitional government was dominated by predominantly Muslim, Arab-speaking northerners, fostering mistrust among the diverse, multi-ethnic, and largely Christian south.

Challenges of Diversity and Honoring Agreements

This mistrust hardened into deep-rooted ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions as southern aspirations for autonomy were largely ignored by the northern-dominated government in Khartoum, undermining the transitional constitution and precipitating the First Sudanese Civil War (1955-1972). The conflict intensified under the regime of Brigadier General Ibrahim Abboud, during which southern leaders organized a guerrilla movement known as the first Anya-Nya rebellion.

While the government in Khartoum enjoyed Egypt's backing, the Anya-Nya movement received sympathy and some support from Uganda and Ethiopia. The protracted 17-year conflict resulted in widespread devastation, claiming thousands of lives and displacing nearly half a million people, before culminating in the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, which conferred a measure of political autonomy and self-governance upon the southern region.

Although the Sudanese government of the time, led by General Gaafar Nimeiry, initially endorsed the Addis Ababa Agreement, it was never incorporated into the 1973 Permanent Constitution, making it easier for Khartoum to disregard its provisions. The agreement was intended to serve as "the law for Regional Self-Government in the Southern Provinces" and granted the southern states a degree of self-rule, including the establishment of a Southern Regional Government.

It further affirmed that "all citizens, without distinction based on race, national origin, birth, language, gender, economic or social status" were entitled to equal rights before the law and guaranteed all citizens "freedom of religion, opinion and of conscience." However, Nimeiry's growing alignment with Islamist elements pushed his government toward greater centralization of power and an increasing emphasis on Islamic principles, marking yet another missed opportunity to govern Sudan's diversity inclusively.

Sudan's 1973 Permanent Constitution was adopted without transparency or meaningful popular participation and concentrated both executive and legislative authority in the presidency. The failure to effectively demobilize and reintegrate the Anya-Nya forces, combined with Nimeiry's decision to divide the South into three regions lacking independent sources of revenue, deepened southern grievances. As a result, conflicts over political authority and economic resources quickly resurfaced.

The final blow to the Addis Ababa Agreement came in 1983, when Nimeiry imposed Islamic Sharia law on the entirety of Sudan - including southern states - triggering the outbreak of the Second Sudanese Civil War that same year. Once again, Sudan's inability to manage its diversity imposed a high cost, fueling sustained resistance from the southern regions. The most formidable resistance emerged from the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the armed wing of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM).

Formed in 1983 under the leadership of Col/Dr. John Garang de Mabior, the SPLM/A sought to address deep-seated religious, ethnic, economic, and political gripes. Garang was committed more to the creation of a new, secular Sudan, but also recognized the importance of affirming the principle of self-determination for the South, given the repeated failures of Sudanese governments to consider Southerners as equal citizens of the country.

The SPLM/A received sustained and comprehensive support from Ethiopia, followed by Uganda, but also from Israel, both directly and indirectly. Ethiopia viewed Sudan's backing of secessionist movements in present-day Eritrea- then part of Ethiopia- as a strategic threat and responded by

engaging in proxy warfare through its support for the SPLM/A in what was required to protect the unity of the country. Similarly, Uganda was supporting the movement in southern Sudan, which also saw Khartoum playing a destabilizing role by backing Ugandan rebel groups, most notably the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Israel's support, meanwhile, was primarily motivated by its interest in countering Arab and Islamist influence in the region.

In 1986, the SPLM/A and the National Alliance for National Salvation (NANS)- a Sudanese opposition coalition formed against Nimeiry's regime- signed the Koka Dam Declaration in Ethiopia. The agreement called for the adoption of the 1956 Constitution with the 1964 amendments on regional government. As another attempt to halt Sudan's recurring cycle of civil war, both sides agreed that the country should be "free from racism, tribalism, sectarianism and all causes of discrimination and disparity." They also committed to repealing the "September 1983 Laws and all other laws that are restrictive of freedoms" and proposed a constitutional conference to be "held under the banner of peace, justice, equality and democracy."

However, the Sudanese government rejected the Declaration, as it was unwilling to engage with sensitive religious issues. Following Nimeiry's overthrow, Sadiq al-Mahdi's fragile coalition government proved unable to fully implement the agreement, further undermining prospects for ending the conflict. Moreover, political fallout over the Koka Dam Agreement within the fractured government in Khartoum- combined with Sudan's deepening economic crisis- paved the way for the 1989 coup that brought Omar al-Bashir to power.

During the Cold War, an Islamist takeover in Sudan was not widely viewed as a major global threat. In some contexts, Islamist movements had even been positioned and supported as part of broader anti-communist efforts during the Cold War. During this period, Sudan expanded its Islamist ambitions beyond the domestic sphere and increasingly projected them across the region. By 1991, Sudan had emerged as one of the most influential actors in the Horn of Africa, supporting forces fighting the military government in Ethiopia. The subsequent collapse of the Ethiopian regime paved the way for Eritrea's eventual independence.

The "National Salvation - Ingaz" Government, led by General Omar el Bashir, comprising Islamists and military officers, came to power vowing to end the southern rebellion by force and had no intention of honoring agreements made by previous regimes relating to autonomy or democratization of Sudan.

With the rebellion gathering momentum, despite the temporary loss of support from the new Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) Government in Addis Ababa, which was keen to build strong relations with Khartoum, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in 1993**,** encouraged by Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, assumed mediation efforts to draft a set of overarching principles to address the Sudanese conflict.

A year later, the SPLM/A signed the IGAD Declaration of Principles (DoP), while the Government of Sudan rejected it. Khartoum objected in particular to provisions stating that the "rights to self-determination of the people of South Sudan to determine their future status through a referendum must be affirmed" and that a "secular and democratic state must be established in the Sudan." By signing the DoP, Garang gained credibility within the IGAD region, resulting in the shift of diplomatic pressure onto Khartoum.

By 1991, the Ingaz (Salvation) government had emerged as an influential regional player and subsequently reassessed its close ties with Egypt. Despite this shift, Sudan continued to maintain connections with Egyptian Islamist militants. In 1995, after a failed assassination attempt on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa, Sudan was accused of supporting the assailants- a charge that severely damaged its relations with

Ethiopia. Egypt sought to exploit the incident to pressure Khartoum into making concessions, while Ethiopia chose to refer the matter to the United Nations (UN). Meanwhile, intensified military operations in the south inflicted heavy material and territorial losses on Khartoum, further compounding its strategic difficulties.

President Bashir subsequently tactically expressed non-objection to the DoP three years later, but on the ground, both sides believed they could strengthen their positions through external military and political support, leaving little incentive to compromise. By the time Khartoum signed the DoP, the SPLM/A had secured strong external political backing and growing regional legitimacy as both a political and military actor.

The war, therefore, dragged on until 2005, claiming over two million lives and displacing millions more as refugees and internally displaced persons-another missed opportunity for an inclusive peace. Disputes over wealth sharing and control of oil-rich territories remained unresolved. Khartoum had long retained all revenues generated from oil fields in Southern Sudan before later proposing an equal revenue-sharing arrangement, which the SPLM/A rejected because the resources rightfully belonged to the South and were critical for rebuilding war-ravaged areas. These disputes were closely tied to unresolved North–South territorial boundaries, mainly in oil-producing areas.

Regional dynamics also increased pressure on Khartoum. While Uganda, Eritrea, and Ethiopia continued supporting the SPLM/A, Khartoum backed opposition groups, militants, and Islamist networks in those countries as part of its broader regional and ideological strategy. These reciprocal proxy confrontations gradually eased by the start of the millennium, creating space for a shift toward internationally backed mediation and enabling Kenya to emerge as the relatively neutral lead mediator in the IGAD peace process.

After 22 years of war, it had become clear that the Sudanese government could not defeat the SPLM/A, nor could the SPLM/A overthrow Khartoum. This prolonged military stalemate, combined with immense humanitarian and economic costs, proved increasingly unsustainable. At the same time, Bashir's government faced mounting pressure from the West, which accused Khartoum of supporting Islamist elements, including Osama bin Laden, and imposed sanctions on Sudan. State-sponsored atrocities in Darfur, together with growing international support for the southern movement, underscored for Khartoum that the war was unwinnable politically, militarily, and economically. These factors ultimately contributed to the signing of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

A Breakthrough After Years of Strife

The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the central government and the SPLM/A established a framework for power-sharing and granted the South self-governing authority. The agreed principles affirmed that "the people of South Sudan have the right to control and govern affairs in their region and participate equitably in the National Government." They also recognized that they "have the right to self-determination, *inter alia*, through a referendum to determine their future status." In addition, both sides committed to rehabilitating "areas affected by the war and redressing the historical imbalances of development and resource allocation."

Unlike past agreements, the CPA did not threaten Khartoum's Islamist-military rule or ideological foundations as far as northern Sudan was concerned. Still, by this stage, there was also a growing sense of resignation within Sudan regarding the likelihood of southern secession, which made adherence to the agreement politically acceptable. Some Islamists in Khartoum were in time convinced that the departure of the South would end the demands for secular government in the North, and were increasingly ready to 'get rid' of the South and all the challenges it represented once and for all. They saw it as an opportunity to reduce the pressures of governing a highly diverse

state and facilitate the consolidation of a more ideologically unified Arab-Islamic state in the North.

Furthermore, in addition to oil revenue-sharing and power-sharing arrangements, the CPA was strongly supported by the international community- particularly the United States, United Kingdom, Norway, IGAD, and the UN. This international backing helped ensure that Southern Sudan was able to hold a referendum in January 2011. With 99 percent of voters opting for independence, the Republic of South Sudan was declared on 9 July 2011, becoming Africa's newest state.

Yet several core issues remained unresolved, including North-South border demarcation, military tensions, and the sharing of oil revenues. The status of Abyei remained especially contentious because of its strategic location and oil reserves. Although the CPA called for a referendum to determine whether Abyei would join the North or South, disputes among its mixed communities over voter eligibility prevented it from taking place. South Sudan's secession also divided international actors: while many supported independence, others preferred a unified Sudan in pursuit of their own regional and strategic interests.

Analysts argue that the independence of South Sudan represented a rejection of Sudan's political order and Khartoum's longstanding inability to manage diversity- a challenge that continues to plague the country to this day. While ruling Islamist elites supported secession in pursuit of a more homogeneous Arab-Islamic state, they soon confronted comparable diversity-driven conflicts in the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile State and even north eastern Sudan prompting many to wonder whether Khartoum learned from South Sudan's independence. None, however, proved as devastating as the conflict in Darfur.

Darfur's Tragedy: Lessons Unlearned in Sudan

Though the CPA proposed a "negotiated settlement on the basis of a democratic system of governance" founded on "the values of justice, democracy, good governance, respect for fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual, mutual understanding and tolerance of diversity within the realities of the Sudan," it was mainly a North-South agreement, and Khartoum's failure to implement it broadly was evident in Darfur.

The Darfur genocide began earlier in 2003, when marginalized non-Arab communities in the region rose in rebellion against the Arab-Islamist government of Omar al-Bashir, demanding an end to long-standing political and economic exclusion. Darfuri Islamists who supported a more inclusive "African Islamism", emphasizing representation from the peripheries, became increasingly alienated by Khartoum's centralization of power and its shift toward more Arab-centric governance.

In response, Bashir's Government mobilized the ethnically homogeneous Janjaweed militias- precursors to today's Rapid Support Forces (RSF)- to suppress the insurgency. Obviously, Sudan's problem was not only the South. The problem was Khartoum's inability to recognize the diversity of the Sudanese across the board.

Three years later, in response to what had become one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters at the time, the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) was tabled. The 2006 DPA was an effort to broker peace between Khartoum and Darfur's two main rebel movements: the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)**.** While the Sudanese government and Minni Minawi, leader of one faction within the SLM, signed the agreement, JEM and Abdel Wahid al-Nur, who led the other major SLM faction, rejected it.

Khartoum's relatively strong military position allowed it to delay and selectively implement the agreement, deepening mistrust among the parties. Disputes over key issues- such as "power sharing, wealth sharing, comprehensive ceasefire and final security arrangements"- persisted. Growing instability led to the establishment of the United

Nations-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) in 2007. With civilian protection as its core mandate, UNAMID was also tasked with supporting humanitarian assistance, monitoring the implementation of peace agreements, promoting human rights, and encouraging inclusive political processes.

Like earlier initiatives, UNAMID fell short of its mandate due to weak international backing, particularly from UN and AU member states, and systematic obstruction by the Sudanese government**,** which delayed troop approvals, rejected certain contingents, and withheld land for bases. Rebel groups also contributed to the inadequate performance of UNAMID. The absence of an inclusive political settlement in Darfur along with the government's history of undermining agreements and initiatives further limited the mission, reducing it to containing violence in some areas rather than ending the conflict and relieving civilian suffering.

The ensuing years in Darfur were marked by widespread killings, ethnic cleansing, mass rape, village destruction, and large-scale displacement targeting non-Arab populations. These atrocities prompted the International Criminal Court (ICC) to indict President Bashir and several Janjaweed commanders on charges of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

A major paradox of the current war is that Hemedti- whose forces emerged from the Janjaweed militias accused of atrocities in Darfur- now presents himself, with support of some countries from the Gulf, as a defender of the region by portraying the RSF as a challenge to the dominance of Khartoum's traditional elites.

The Rise of Political Islam

Islamism has played a central role in Sudan's political trajectory. Its modern politicization emerged in the post-colonial period, as urbanization and expanding access to education exposed northern Sudanese elites to Islamic thought influenced in part by Egyptian models. The ideas of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood gained early traction within academic institutions before evolving into an organized political force. Under the leadership of Hassan al-Turabi in the early 1960s, the project of establishing an Islamic order became increasingly embedded within Sudan's political landscape.

Al-Turabi was pivotal in integrating political Islam with the structures of the modern state. During the rule of Jaafar Nimeiri, the government extended periodic concessions to al-Turabi and his allies, granting them political space and influence. This enabled him to establish the National Islamic Front (NIF) in 1985 and advance the Islamization of Sudanese society through legal, educational, and institutional reforms. His role in facilitating the 1989 military coup, which brought Omar al-Bashir to power, consolidated his influence and positioned Sudan as one of the first African states to formally adopt an Islamist-oriented state project. At the outset of the coup, Turabi wielded greater influence, reflected in the way his office was structured and organized.

In the 1990s, Turabi and his allies entrenched loyal Islamists across the military, security services, judiciary, and state bureaucracy, reinforcing Khartoum's longstanding reluctance to pursue negotiated political solutions to the grievances of non-Arab and non-Muslim communities. Even within the armed forces, the regime cultivated parallel paramilitary structures to act as ideological enforcers and safeguards, reflecting a lack of full trust in the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF).

The policy of Tamkiin (empowerment) was implemented to transform the state into a partisan, ideologically driven system- suppressing independent civil society and purging opponents from state institutions. However, the failed 1995 assassination attempt on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak proved to be a major turning point for Sudan and the broader region. Sudan's Islamist government was widely accused of supporting the militants involved, which precipitated regional isolation, strained relations with Egypt and

neighboring states, the imposition of UN sanctions, and mounting international pressure on Khartoum.

During Bill Clinton's presidency, the United States conducted missile strikes on the Sudanese capital. Sudan's sympathetic stance toward Iraq further aggravated tensions, as did Khartoum's hosting of Osama bin Laden in the early 1990s. In the wake of these setbacks, Sudan's Islamic Movement gradually began to distance itself from transnational Islamist ambitions and recalibrate its regional strategy.

In 1998, the NIF was formally reconstituted as the National Congress Party (NCP). A year later, the Bashir-Turabi alliance collapsed when Bashir orchestrated a political maneuver that removed Turabi, accusing him of attempting to undermine the presidency, and consolidated his own control over the regime.

Growing Securitization and the Decline of Civic Space

President Bashir's deliberate attempt to weaken the capacity of other political actors that would otherwise challenge his rule was a key feature of his autocratic rule. Faced with an economic crisis and sanctions by the UN, EU, UK, and the US, he continued prioritizing the loyalty of the security apparatus, allowing security forces to secure independent revenue streams.

Backed by a well-funded security establishment, the President fostered rivalries among security institutions to 'coup-proof' his regime. He deliberately fragmented the security apparatus by assigning overlapping responsibilities to different security institutions and using them as counterweights, while limiting coordination and communication to ensure that no single force became powerful enough to challenge his rule.

While making the SAF the most institutionalized force, he also strengthened Sudan's secret police, tasking it with suppressing political opposition. He further institutionalized the Janjaweed by transforming them into an official paramilitary force- the RSF- under the leadership of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, widely known as Hemedti, whom Bashir reportedly called "Hamayti"- my protector.

The deployment of the RSF to the Yemeni Civil War between 2015 and 2020 significantly transformed both the RSF and Sudan's security landscape. Fighting as a proxy force for the UAE and the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis, thousands of RSF fighters were trained, funded, and equipped by Abu Dhabi, with many reportedly promised payments through Emirati banks for their service. The war provided the RSF with independent financial resources, combat experience, and direct regional ties, accelerating its evolution from a regime-aligned militia into a battle-hardened and increasingly autonomous paramilitary force. This further fragmented Sudan's security apparatus by empowering the RSF as a parallel military actor outside the full control of the Sudanese army, laying the groundwork for its later campaign in Sudan.

Over time, the repression of civil society, labor unions in urban centers, and marginalized communities in Sudan's peripheries generated growing resistance to the regime. These pressures intensified after the secession of South Sudan in 2011, which deprived Sudan of nearly three-quarters of its oil reserves and deepened an already fragile economy, further compounded by declining global oil prices.

The 2011 Agreement on Oil and Related Economic Matters between Sudan and South Sudan reflected the post-independence reality that most oil-producing fields were located in South Sudan, while Sudan retained control of the transit infrastructure needed to export oil through Port Sudan. Both countries agreed that "each State shall have permanent sovereignty over its natural resources located in or underneath its territory, including petroleum resources" and that "each state shall have sovereignty over all petroleum facilities constructed or installed for the petroleum operations within its territory."

This worsening economic crisis fueled recurring

waves of unrest across Sudan. Although protests and political dissent were not new to the government, the 2018-19 uprising marked a decisive break from the past. Driven by deepening economic hardship, entrenched political repression, and decades of authoritarian rule, hundreds of thousands of Sudanese mobilized against Omar al-Bashir's military-backed government and demanded a transition to civilian rule.

In the twilight years of his Government, Bashir instituted a form of National Dialogue as a means to reaffirm legitimacy. Though the main opposition forces were not included in the dialogue, the robust participation of civil society organizations and other disaffected sectors of society, resulted in a set of recommendations that the Government found hard to swallow. Key recommendations, supported by the majority of participants, called for the dismantling of militias, military reform, removal of the military from the economy, democratization of society, disarmament of national security forces, federalism, and the primacy of citizenship - irrespective of race and religion - in the definition of Sudanese identity. Clearly, Sudan was ready for major transformation. The rule of the 'Ingaz' regime was brought to an end. However, these recommendations went unimplemented and continued to persist as core structural challenges.

Following President Bashir's removal by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in April 2019, civilian groups continued to press for an inclusive democratic transition. In response, a joint military-civilian government was established as a negotiated compromise between protest leaders and the military, intended to stabilize the country and facilitate a transition to civilian rule.

The 2019 Sudan Constitutional Declaration, signed by the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), created a power-sharing framework between the two parties for a transitional period not exceeding "39 Gregorian months." Under this arrangement, governance during the transition was to be carried out through three institutions: the Sovereignty Council, the Cabinet, and the Legislative Council.

The Sovereignty Council was composed of 11 members, including five civilians appointed by the FFC, five members selected by the TMC, and one civilian chosen by mutual agreement. The Declaration specified that during the first 21 months, the Sovereignty Council would be "chaired by someone selected by the military members," while the remaining 18 months would be chaired "by a civilian member selected be the five civilian members who were selected" by the FFC. The transition period would be followed by free and fair elections aimed at establishing long-term civilian rule and democratic legitimacy. The administration would be led by Prime Minister, the economist Abdalla Hamdok.

Cohesion among civilian forces within the FFC deteriorated relatively quickly, undermining their ability to effectively check military authority or consolidate democratic governance structures. This fragmentation was not solely the result of pressure from security actors or ideological diversity, but also reflected the competing, self-interested agendas of political parties. Many of these actors operated within a zero-sum political mindset shaped by decades of authoritarian rule, prioritizing influence and positioning over collective strategy.

As the transition progressed, political parties increasingly competed for prominence across key policy debates, often at the expense of unity. Disagreements over economic reform, justice processes, and security sector restructuring further deepened internal divisions, limiting the emergence of a coherent civilian agenda. These tensions also strained relations with the military, contributing to a gradual breakdown in cooperation within the transitional government.

Following a long period of infighting among the civilians and growing contradictions between civilians and the military, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the head of the SAF and Sudan's de facto leader, alongside his deputy and RSF commander

Hemedti, carried out a coup in October 2021 that dismantled the joint military- civilian government, further contributing to the ruling party's pattern of unfulfilled commitments. The military seized executive power, detained civilian leaders, and placed Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok under arrest. He would later flee Sudan.

Although hopes for democratization appeared to fade, the gravest crisis was yet to unfold. Disputes over the integration of the RSF into the national army and over military leadership triggered fighting between SAF and RSF in April 2023, radiating out from the capital, a conflict that has now endured for nearly three years. The war has since escalated into the world's largest humanitarian and displacement crisis, leaving millions at risk of famine, subjected to widespread atrocities, and deprived of a functioning healthcare system.

The ethnic dimension of the conflict is difficult to ignore. The SAF is largely dominated by Arab oriented classes from northern and central Sudan, whom the RSF view as responsible for their historical marginalization. The RSF, drawn mainly from Arabized tribal groups in Darfur and western Sudan and believing that it has equal rights to Khartoum, has long been regarded as sub-national and incapable of operating as a professional army, reflecting entrenched center-periphery prejudices.

Post-Coup Islamist Resurgence

The 2019 revolution marked a critical shift toward disentangling religion from the state. Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and Abdelaziz al-Hilu of the SPLM-N formalized this direction through an agreement stipulating that "the state shall not establish an official religion" and that "no citizen shall be discriminated against based on their religion". Although widely embraced as a meaningful step toward democratic governance, the influence of Sudanese Islamism did not disappear; rather, it receded from public view.

The October 2021 military coup against the civilian-led transitional government reopened political space for the very actors the 2019 revolution had aimed to sideline. Islamist figures who had previously been removed from office gradually reentered key roles across civilian, judicial, and security institutions. By the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, these networks had regained sufficient prominence to become strategically significant for the SAF.

Currently, a number of influential figures once dismissed due to their association with Bashir-era governance have begun to exert authority through ties to Islamist-aligned paramilitary groups, presenting themselves as essential partners to the SAF. Their reemergence reflects not only a consolidation of Islamist-nationalist currents but also highlights the military's limited ability to govern independently. They also remain the backbone of the SAF fighting forces.

At the same time, internal divisions within the SAF remain pronounced. The Al-Bara ibn Malik Brigade, widely identified as the military wing of Sudan's Islamic Movement, has emerged as one of the main paramilitary groups fighting alongside the SAF. The brigade portrays the war not only as a battle over state control, but also as a defense of an Islamist political project. At the same time, credible reports point to growing tensions between the brigade and other SAF-aligned factions over political influence, command structures, and competing ideological agendas.

These competing tendencies underscore a fragile coalition, sustained more by a shared adversary in the RSF than by a unified political vision. Burhan's calculated engagement with Islamist actors has produced a relationship of mutual dependence: while their support bolsters his position, their increasing assertiveness carries the risk of constraining his authority. At the same time, these actors remain cognizant that their political rehabilitation is closely tied to his continued leadership.

The renewed prominence of Islamist elements within the SAF points to a possible reorientation of its long-term strategic outlook for Sudan, while further deepening the ideological cleavages that

have historically shaped the country's political order. In parallel, the RSF characterizes the SAF as heavily influenced by entrenched Islamist networks associated with the Bashir era, framing its campaign as an effort to dismantle and prevent the restoration of that influence.

The RSF, although formally linked to the SAF and historically tied to the presidency, has long functioned with considerable autonomy. Its ranks are largely drawn from Darfur-based Arab militias, alongside recruits from other parts of Sudan and fighters from neighboring countries. Most importantly, the RSF was formally legalized and incorporated into Sudan's state structure through legislation passed by parliament in 2017, allowing it to receive official state funding and budget allocations.

Operating under a unified command loyal to its leadership, the RSF has sought to expand its influence with the broader objective of reshaping Sudan's security architecture and positioning itself as a dominant military force. Its base of support includes allied militia groups from regions such as Darfur and South Kordofan, as well as foreign fighters reportedly originating from Chad, the Central African Republic, Libya, and beyond.

The group's growing autonomy has been reinforced through external engagements. A notable example is the 2015 arrangement with the UAE, under which RSF forces were deployed in support of coalition operations in Yemen. This involvement provided both financial and political benefits, enabling the RSF to strengthen its independent command structure, secure its own revenue streams, and decision-making separate from the national army. This degree of autonomy has been viewed by the SAF as a significant threat to Sudan's military cohesion and broader national stability.

Drivers of Protracted Conflict

Deadlock in Motion: Continued Fighting Without Resolution

Three years into the conflict, civilians remain the only constituency consistently calling for genuine peace, yet they are deeply divided, with political forces fragmented into rival blocs with competing interests. Many civilians have also been drawn into the war along ethnic and identity lines, while continued reliance on armed actors and local militias for protection and basic needs has left them increasingly marginalized. Both belligerents have demonstrated scant regard for peace- or for civilian protection. Reports of RSF atrocities, particularly in Darfur and Kordofan, underscore the group's limited willingness to engage in meaningful diplomacy, while the SAF has relied on Islamist hardliners, heavy weaponry, and allied militias to sustain the conflict and resist ceasefire efforts.

The SAF's increased reliance on airpower has resulted in airstrikes on towns, public spaces, and critical infrastructure, causing civilian casualties and disrupting basic services. This approach has raised concerns that the army is prioritizing military victory over a negotiated settlement with the RSF. Conversely, the RSF has been widely accused of systematic and extreme violence against civilians in its pursuit of territorial control and shows little sign of establishing a representative political force that would resemble an alternative.

RSF's capture of El-Fasher in October 2025 has further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis while undermining the SAF's legitimacy in Sudan's peripheral regions. Control of El-Fasher allows the RSF to enter negotiations from a position of military strength in Darfur, reducing incentives to compromise or meaningfully include civilians in future political arrangements. Many fear that continued violence in Darfur and Kordofan will further erode civilian resistance, entrenching a conflict resolution process driven by military bargaining rather than inclusive peace.

In Eastern Sudan, multiple armed actors with competing agendas- largely rooted in long-standing grievances over political and economic marginalization- have entered the conflict. These intra-Sudanese rivalries risk triggering localized violence, intensifying cross-border ethnic politics,

and transforming the region into a theater for proxy competition. The emergence of the Al-Amin Dawood group, the Eastern Sudan Liberation Movement (ESLM) led by Ibrahim Dunya, and the growing influence of key figures such as Nazir Trik, Musa Mohamed Ahmed, and Suleiman Bitay further complicate Sudan's security landscape, with implications that extend well beyond the country's borders.

Prospects for ending the violence remain bleak, as the SAF has prioritized tactical cooperation with several of these militias, offering political incentives and modest financial support in return for battlefield cooperation. While expedient in the short term, these alliances are likely to carry significant long-term consequences for governance and stability in Eastern Sudan.

Both sides continue to make incremental gains and suffer losses in their seemingly endless attempt to end the war through military means, with the latest fighting concentrated in the Kordofan region. Yet neither appears to have absorbed the lessons of history: asserting military control over regions where populations have long been marginalized is unlikely to produce sustainable peace. The SAF will likely face mounting grievances in the territories it holds, particularly in Eastern Sudan. Similarly, the RSF's dominance over peripheral areas- most notably Darfur and western Kordofan- is likely to encounter resistance from communities that have not forgotten the group's past and present-day atrocities.

Navigating an Entrenched War Economy

Historically, Sudan has been marked by a pronounced economic divide between the center and its peripheries, reflecting deep structural inequalities. The center has long depended on resource- and labor-rich marginal regions to sustain its own development and industrialization, while also recruiting security forces from these areas to safeguard urban economic interests. In recent years, however, this dynamic has shifted as the center's control over the periphery has weakened, enabling non-urban actors to assert greater authority over these resources. Since the outbreak of war in April 2023, these conditions have exacerbated the risks of a war economy characterized by limited accountability, unclear ownership, and the erosion of ethical constraints.

Sudan's war economy has staggered on in recent months, creating strong financial incentives for armed groups to prolong the conflict while the majority of the population sinks deeper into poverty. In the early stages of the war, revenue generation centered on asset seizure, control of trade routes, checkpoints, and forced taxation. More recently, however, combatants have increasingly relied on the systematic control of displaced populations as a source of income.

The forced displacement of civilians has thus become a strategic tool, as affected populations remain dependent on controlled routes and markets, enabling taxation, extortion, and exploitation. Moreover, control over humanitarian corridors has elevated armed actors into critical gatekeepers, particularly as humanitarian organizations scale back assistance, further entrenching the war economy.

The 2019 agreement sought to "implement measures to achieve transitional justice, fight corruption, recover stolen funds" and "reform the national economy". Yet, amid the worst humanitarian crisis in Sudan's history, gold production surged between 2023 and 2025. Reports indicate that despite the conflict, Sudan's gold production rose sharply, reaching 64 tons in 2024- an increase of 53 percent from 41.8 tons in 2022- generating approximately $1.57 billion in legal export revenues. At the same time, an unquantified black-market trade persists, driven by ongoing instability.

It is also worth noting that Hemedti's military ascent has been complemented by extensive business interests in gold mining, livestock, and infrastructure. Under President Bashir, he seized control of lucrative gold mines in Darfur, enabling

him to oversee a significant share of the country's gold production and exports to date. However, no official reporting confirms the full extent of his wealth

Control over Sudan's gold resources remains divided, with the SAF dominating eastern deposits and the RSF holding sway over central and southwestern goldfields. Much of this output, however, has bypassed official state channels, flowing instead into parallel markets and across poorly monitored borders, depriving the state of substantial revenue. In the context of widespread instability and weak governance, smuggling networks have expanded rapidly, exploiting the absence of effective oversight. Sudan's vast gold reserves have also emerged as one of the country's most strategically significant assets, drawing growing interest from regional and international actors seeking economic influence, access to supply networks, and geopolitical leverage.

Addressing this illicit trade will require coherent security and economic policies. Sudan's vast territory and porous borders have further complicated efforts to curb informal gold flows, which predominantly end up in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Revenues generated from gold have enabled armed actors to sustain and prolong the conflict, significantly reducing their incentives to engage meaningfully in peace negotiations as long as military operations remain financially viable.

Another major source of Sudan's revenue is oil exports. While the SAF controls the Khartoum and Port Sudan refineries, the Heglig area in southern Sudan, near the South Sudan border, has been overrun by the RSF. The civil war has had devastating consequences for the oil sector, with repeated targeting of infrastructure, oilfields, and pipelines threatening production and export routes. Fighting has rendered the Khartoum Refinery- the country's largest- inoperable and caused widespread damage to critical infrastructure nationwide. Since the conflict began, Sudan's oil production has fallen to approximately 24,000 barrels per day, down from about 64,000 barrels per day before the war.

As with gold, armed actors have increasingly used oil as leverage, further intensifying conflict-driven economic patterns. Disruptions to the oil sector have been a major concern for South Sudan, which produces most of the oil but depends on Sudan's pipelines, refineries, and export terminals leading to Port Sudan. The economic stakes are immense- oil accounts for over 90 percent of South Sudan's national revenue, marking instability north of the border an existential threat. Although Khartoum has at times accused South Sudan of backing the RSF, securing oil infrastructure in strategic locations remains a shared priority.

As a result, the SAF, the RSF, and the government of South Sudan signed a tripartite agreement in December 2025, designating the Heglig area- Sudan's most productive oil field- as a neutral zone free from active hostilities. Under the agreement, the South Sudan People's Defense Forces (SSPDF) are tasked with securing the oil facilities by crossing into the area, while the RSF withdraws from the oilfields but retains control over surrounding territories.

Rooted in shared economic necessity, the tripartite arrangement requires high levels of coordination and discipline. It also underscores that while the warring parties are capable of reaching agreements when financial interests are at stake, they have thus far lacked the political will to commit to a broader, inclusive peace process. Additionally, one cannot ignore that South Sudan's role in mediating the conflict in the north underscores the complexities and challenges of Khartoum's political landscape.

While a deal aimed at silencing the guns- even in a limited area- may be viewed as a positive development, the Heglig agreement contains significant flaws that undermine inclusive peace and meaningful negotiations.

Role of Neighboring States and Regional Dynamics

Egypt

Sudan's civil war has drawn in several of its other immediate neighbors- Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Chad, and Libya- some of which host large numbers of Sudanese refugees and face heightened concerns over cross-border insecurity. The differing postures and divided alignments of these states have further complicated the conflict and reinforced destabilizing regional dynamics. Sudan's neighbors have major economic and security interests tied to the outcome of the war, including concerns over the Nile water and its utilization after the completion of the Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD), border stability, refugee flows, trade routes, armed groups, and access to strategic resources. The conflict has also intensified regional rivalries and proxy involvement, as neighboring states seek to protect their political influence and broader geopolitical interests in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region.

Sharing a 1,276-kilometer border with Sudan, Egypt's relationship with its southern neighbor is particularly close and strategically significant. Cairo believes that real democratization in Sudan involving Darfurians and Sudanese with pronounced African heritage would weaken elements on which Egypt's security has traditionally rested. The challenge to the Cairo-leaning establishment in Sudan is viewed as posing a direct risk to Egypt's security and vital national interests, most notably Nile water resources. Egypt's support for the SAF reflects its strategic calculus- Cairo cannot afford the riverine Sudanese to lose, given Cairo's ongoing tussle with Addis over the GERD.

Cairo has traditionally trained SAF as an extension of the Egyptian Armed Forces and continues to provide political, diplomatic, and military backing to the SAF. The RSF has accused Egypt of direct military involvement, alleging Egyptian airstrikes against its positions. The RSF's control of El-Fasher and parts of northwestern Sudan has heightened Egypt's security and migration vulnerabilities, given the proximity of these areas to Egypt's Western Desert.

Alongside increased risks of arms smuggling, Egypt has also experienced an influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the RSF and crossing through its porous borders. Egypt's expanded military role in Sudan was further cemented in December 2025, when Cairo activated its joint defense agreement with Khartoum in response to perceived threats to "red lines" involving both Sudanese state institutions and Egypt's national security.

Yet Egypt now finds itself in a strategic dilemma. Continued backing of the SAF risks prolonging the war, thereby exacerbating Egypt's own security, economic, and humanitarian pressures. At the same time, Cairo views a Sudan dominated by the RSF-particularly one backed by regional adversaries-as an unacceptable outcome. Egypt's support for the SAF is therefore rooted in its long-standing preference for a Sudan that remains strategically aligned with Cairo and relatively dependent on it, rather than one capable of independently conducting its affairs and managing its foreign relations-including with Egypt.

Egypt understands that RSF control over western Sudan and other peripheral areas could weaken its traditional influence in the country. This creates a paradox in Egypt's policy. Cairo claims to adopt an institutionalist approach, maintaining the SAF as the only institution worth preserving, regardless of who leads it. However, if that same institution is not enabled to accommodate Sudan's peripheries, then the claim to institutionalism becomes oxymoron. In practice, Egypt may be weakening the very institution it seeks to uphold. If the SAF fails to govern in a manner that is equitably inclusive of the peripheries, it will likely be rejected by large segments of the Sudanese population.

Clearly, a Sudan heavily influenced by non-SAF elements from the periphery would significantly weaken Egypt's leverage in Nile Basin politics,

depriving Cairo of a vital- though wavering- ally in its dispute with Ethiopia over the GERD. Furthermore, RSF dominance in Darfur and elsewhere would continue to erode Egypt's influence over Sudan's political future. For Egypt, the SAF- even with its Islamic backing- remains preferable to any alternative outcome.

Ethiopia

To the east, Ethiopia's perceived distancing from SAF, widely perceived as a shift toward directly or indirectly supporting the RSF, is taking shape. In 2019 Ethiopia had been viewed as a more or less impartial neighbor but wary of the close ties Egypt enjoyed with SAF. The defense/security agreement SAF signed with Egypt, the effects of which could place Egypt in close proximity to the Sudanese-Ethiopian border; added to the warm ties between Addis and Abu Dhabi could be seen as contributing to Ethiopia's maintaining relations with RSF different from those pursued by Egypt, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia. This needs to be seen in the context of the continued presence of Tigrayan forces in Sudan and the new links between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF- Debretsion faction) with Asmara. The subsequent perception of alignments are believed to have led to the growing conviction in Addis and Khartoum/Port Sudan that 'the other' is in close league with domestic challengers to the respective status quo.

Mounting domestic security challenges- that Eritrea and Tigrayan stakeholders are driving including armed clashes with Fano militias in the Amhara region, a dysfunctional relationship between the Federal government and the mainline Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and heightened tensions with Eritrea and Egypt- tempt Addis Ababa to reconsider its previously relatively more impartial posture in the Sudanese conflict, keeping in mind also its warm relations with the UAE.

Ethiopian officials increasingly view the war in Sudan as having created an enabling environment for armed groups to operate against the Ethiopian state. That said, however, Ethiopia is careful not to completely alienate SAF; after all, SAF controls most of the territory bordering Ethiopia. Addis has accepted the Sudanese Ambassador to Ethiopia and Ethiopian Airlines did launch the Addis Ababa-Port Sudan route, and it significantly uses Sudan's territory to overfly to most of it's the northern hemisphere flights.

These concerns are shaped by recent history. During the Tigray War (2020-2022), Addis Ababa accused the SAF of sheltering TPLF elements. Sudanese forces also took advantage of Ethiopia's internal crisis to reassert control over large portions of the disputed al-Fashaga borderlands. These developments have reinforced perceptions in Addis Ababa that a SAF-led Sudan would remain an unfriendly neighbor, particularly given its close ties with Egypt.

This sense of mistrust appears mutual, as SAF leadership, convinced that Ethiopia's lack of warmth can only mean that Addis is fully in support of the RSF, alleges that Ethiopian territory serves as a supply corridor for the UAE's continued backing of the paramilitary group. From Addis Ababa's perspective, Sudan is no longer merely a neighboring state in crisis, but a strategic battleground in which Ethiopia's adversaries can project influence and constrain its regional leverage.

Ethiopia continues to be annoyed by Khartoum's persisting diplomatic accord with Egypt on the Nile file, though it understands that this is more out of worry about what Egypt could do to the leadership in Khartoum. Otherwise, Sudan knows well the benefits of the GERD to Sudanese agriculture, a position that worries Cairo. Cairo's public activation of mutual defense arrangements with Khartoum in late 2025 amplified these concerns and reinforced Ethiopia's apparent policy shift.

Lastly, the deterioration in relations between Asmara and Addis Ababa following the November 2022 Pretoria Peace Agreement- which formally ended the two-year war between Ethiopia's federal government and the TPLF- alongside Ethiopia's

public pursuit of sea access, has elevated Sudanese territory into a strategic regional arena for Eritrea and Egypt. This shift has created space for Eritrea to deepen its security and military cooperation with the SAF and Egypt, reaffirming Ethiopia's counterbalancing calculus rather than remaining a passive bystander in the conflict. Ethiopia and Emirati interests have increasingly converged around the RSF as an offset to a SAF-led bloc backed by Egypt and Eritrea.

Eritrea

Recent developments along the Red Sea have drawn Eritrea and SAF/Sudan closer, with Asmara hosting and training SAF-aligned fighters, particularly in Eastern Sudan. Eritrea has reportedly deployed naval forces along the Sudanese coast. Meanwhile, the UAE's ties with Ethiopia and its support for the RSF have become a growing source of concern for Asmara.

Eritrea remains an influential external actor in Sudanese matters. While broadly aligned with the Sudanese Army, Asmara has also extended patronage to other movements in Eastern Sudan- a strategy that may raise concerns in Khartoum. By consolidating a buffer zone along its western border, Eritrea has positioned itself to exert significant influence over post-war governance in Eastern Sudan.

Concerns are intensifying over the arming of tribal constituencies in Eastern Sudan, a region that is fast emerging as a pivotal front in the civil war. The proliferation of armed actors- each rooted in distinct social bases and backed by differing external patrons- reflects the deep fragmentation of local authority and the erosion of state institutions. In this fluid landscape, Eritrea has emerged as the central power broker, intent on influencing the direction and alignment of these groups.

If not handled carefully, Eastern Sudan risks becoming a replay of Darfur, where genuine frustrations among marginalized communities are appropriated by political and armed elites, ultimately deepening civilian suffering. Such dynamics could accelerate the region's militarization and further obstruct prospects for a political settlement. Long-term stability will hinge on whether these groups can be meaningfully integrated into a cohesive national Sudanese project- one that curtails proxy competition by neighboring states and regional powers.

Chad

Since the outbreak of the war, more than one million people- mostly from non-Arab ethnic groups- have reportedly fled into eastern Chad, placing significant strain on the country's humanitarian response capacity. This large-scale displacement, combined with well-documented claims of N'Djamena's support for the RSF, has generated mixed reactions in the capital, where critics accuse the president of facilitating the UAE's transfer of arms to the paramilitary group through Chadian territory.

With a sharp decline in emergency response funding, the already limited humanitarian services have come under severe strain, particularly in the town of Adré in Ouaddaï province. The civil war has overwhelmed the border town, as many refugees who were expected to relocate to established camps have yet to move. Initial support from the local community has waned, transforming both the town and the province into flashpoints for tensions between refugees and host populations.

Over the past year, Chad has reportedly reduced its support for the RSF, compelling the UAE to shift its arms supply routes through Libya. This alternative, however, has proven increasingly unreliable. In January 2026, Eastern Libyan authorities temporarily closed Kufra Airport apparently following pressure from Egypt. At the same time, border tensions persist between Chadian President Mahamat Idriss Déby's Zaghawa political allies and RSF-linked Arab militias. These Chadian elites have voiced strong opposition to the RSF's offensive in Northern Darfur, especially in and around El-Fasher, a core Zaghawa constituency.

Tensions reached a critical point in mid-January 2026 when the RSF carried out an attack on Chadian forces, disrupting its own supply lines in the process. Although the paramilitary group quickly expressed deep regret over what it described as unintended clashes, it placed the blame on armed movements aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood-linked forces based in western Darfur. Regardless, the incident can further strain an already complex relationship between the Chadian ruling clan and the RSF.

Nevertheless, Abu Dhabi's relationship with N'Djamena has heightened friction with Khartoum. While an outright war between the neighbors appears unlikely, diplomatic engagement has so far yielded little progress. The SAF remains critical of N'Djamena's refusal to adopt a neutral position in Sudan's civil war.

The situation is in flux. In April 2026, Chad closed its border with Sudan after Chadian soldiers and civilians were killed in clashes between the RSF and militia's loyal to Sudan's government, which spilled into Chadian territory. Chadian authorities stated the border would remain closed with exception for government-approved humanitarian operations.

Libya

In June 2025, Sudan's army reported attacks on its border posts by forces aligned with Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar. Khartoum had previously accused him of facilitating UAE-supplied weapons to the RSF. Analysts view Haftar's involvement as strategic: by controlling key eastern and southern corridors, he both regulates and profits from the flow of fuel and arms that sustain the RSF.

Haftar's involvement has shifted him from a local strongman to a pivotal link in a regional proxy network, granting him strategic leverage over both Khartoum and Abu Dhabi. By aligning his territory with the UAE's objectives in Sudan, he has extended his influence beyond Libya. In recent weeks, pressure has grown from Saudi Arabia to close the Libyan corridor to the RSF.

In response, authorities in Khartoum have sustained close ties with Tripoli, with reports indicating growing engagement between the Sudanese military and Libya's internationally recognized government aimed at strengthening intelligence-sharing and security coordination.

The Quad and the Externalization of Sudan's War

Rivalries and policy divergences are also evident within the Quad, a coalition of four countries convened to mediate and bring an end to the ongoing crisis. The group comprises the US, the UK, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. However, in the context of this conflict, the two Gulf states have emerged as the most influential external actors, making the widening rift between them particularly alarming for prospects of a genuine and sustainable peace.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's promotion of competing models of regional order continues to undermine the prospects of a Quad-brokered peace. Although the two states were largely aligned during the early phases of the 2015 war in Yemen, their strategic priorities eventually diverged. This pattern has persisted in Sudan: Saudi Arabia continues to back the SAF out of concern that a fractured Sudan could destabilize the wider region, while the UAE's support for the RSF is driven not only by economic considerations but also by ideological motives, particularly its larger campaign against Islamist influence of any type.

Given the current dynamics, it is unsurprising that the SAF has declined to participate in any negotiations mediated or overseen by the UAE. A defense agreement between the SAF and Pakistan, brokered by Saudi Arabia, has further complicated the stalled talks, with Burhan insisting that no peace deal will be accepted unless the RSF is disarmed or eliminated. At the same time, the RSF's territorial gains in western and central-southern Sudan have emboldened them to continue fighting.

Mediation efforts by the other Quad members- the US and UK- have so far been unsuccessful. The US proposed peace talks in Jeddah with Saudi facilitation, but these efforts collapsed, prompting Washington to shift its focus toward aid delivery. At the same time, the US is treading carefully in balancing relations with its Gulf allies. With a Trump administration increasingly retreating from soft diplomacy in Africa, many fear that Sudan may be relegated to the backburner- or, worse, ignored entirely.

The SAF's military alliances beyond the Quad have increasingly become an obstacle to peace. Russia's pursuit of access to Sudan's gold resources and a potential naval facility on the Red Sea has translated into military support for the SAF. Ties with Qatar and Turkey are similarly shaped by shared Islamist networks. Meanwhile, Iran's renewed presence in Khartoum can only be understood in light of Sudan's strategic location. The Horn of Africa and the Red Sea's growing strategic importance has intensified external interest in Sudan's internal affairs, likely prolonging the conflict and turning the country into a never-ending proxy battleground. Ending the war will require a framework that extends well beyond the Quad. Here, it must not be overlooked that there might be a sense where the more resolute support for the Palestinian cause by the SAF might easily and conveniently be seen as fostering an Islamist agenda.

Terrorism Listing of Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood-Associated Actors

In March 2026, the US Department of State classified the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist entity. However, ambiguity surrounds the group's identity, as it does not operate under this formal label within Sudan. Rather than targeting a clearly defined organization, the move appears directed at a network of actors linked to the Sudanese Islamic Movement (SIM), historically embedded within state institutions. This includes groups such as the Al-Baraa bin Malik Brigade, which has been fighting alongside the SAF in the ongoing conflict.

This step is expected to impose significant political and economic costs on the SIM, potentially constraining the reach and effectiveness of Islamist-aligned networks, despite their reliance on informal and decentralized structures. While the RSF faces widespread accusations of serious human rights abuses, the move suggests that Western policymakers view the SAF and its Islamist-linked networks as a more substantial obstacle to peace. One can argue that the designation's timing- coinciding with the escalation of the US-Israeli conflict with Iran- was not accidental.

Within Sudan, pro-democracy groups and civilian actors have largely welcomed the decision, interpreting it as recognition of longstanding grievances tied to exclusion and marginalization under Khartoum's leadership. At the same time, concerns persist that focusing primarily on state-aligned actors could inadvertently strengthen rival forces that also face allegations of abuse. Critics further warn of the economic and humanitarian consequences associated with terrorism-related sanctions, while others argue that broad measures risk fostering perceptions of collective punishment, potentially fueling nationalist backlash.

For the US and its Western partners, a distinction appears to be drawn between a transactional paramilitary force- one that may eventually be contained- and a deeply rooted ideological network embedded within state institutions, which is far more difficult to challenge. This distinction informs their assessment of the conflict and has placed a central component of Sudan's political order under sustained international scrutiny. It also compels members of the Quad and other external actors to reconsider how their engagement with the SAF may be perceived globally, while altering the diplomatic environment in which any future political settlement will be negotiated.

Ultimately, it remains unclear whether this measure will advance prospects for peace or contribute to further fragmentation. Singling out particular actors may reinforce perceptions of uneven international engagement. The RSF, for its part, has sought to capitalize on this narrative by presenting itself as a secular alternative, despite ongoing accusations of mass atrocities. Nevertheless, the shift can create space for other stakeholders- including civil society actors, technocrats, and regional mediators- to reassert their role in shaping Sudan's future. Their effectiveness will depend on their ability to bridge their frustrating differences, navigate entrenched military structures, and leverage international support

The Iran War and Its Regional Reverberations

The escalation of hostilities involving the US, Israel, and Iran has produced far-reaching repercussions across the Middle East and the Red Sea region, generating significant political and economic disruption. It has deepened regional instability, heightened the risk of a wider conflict, strained energy markets, and driven up global oil prices, particularly amid tensions surrounding critical maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz. In the Red Sea corridor, the conflict has increased the likelihood of attacks by Iran-aligned Houthi forces on key shipping lanes, including the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, thereby threatening maritime security and the flow of global trade.

In Sudan, these dynamics have translated into rising fuel and food prices, driven by higher global energy costs and disruptions to maritime trade routes. The already dire humanitarian situation- exacerbated by the country's ongoing conflict- has further deteriorated due to interruptions in logistics and supply chains reliant on Red Sea transit routes.

The war in Iran has also elicited divergent responses among Sudanese political and military actors. Militant Islamist figures and their affiliates have openly expressed support for Tehran, urging the broader Muslim world to follow suit. By contrast, the leadership of the SAF and associated diplomatic institutions have adopted a more cautious posture, seeking to preserve a delicate geopolitical balance. This has included condemning elements of the conflict- such as Iran's ballistic missile strikes on Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Jordan- while notably omitting any reference to the UAE. The RSF, for their part, have characterized Tehran's missile attacks as "regional and international terrorism."

The Sudanese government thus confronts a complex strategic dilemma. While it must manage and, at times, restrain pro-Iranian rhetoric from allied militias, it remains reliant on these same actors for battlefield effectiveness. Simultaneously, Khartoum must signal solidarity with Arab states affected by the conflict- particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar-whose financial and political backing remains indispensable.

This balancing act is further complicated by the need to maintain cohesion among domestically aligned militant networks and avoid internal fragmentation amid an ongoing civil war. Meanwhile, Sudan's leadership cannot afford to be drawn into a wider regional confrontation while it remains deeply entangled in its own conflict. In this context, public expressions of support for Iran by prominent Islamist figures such as Al-Naji Abdullah and Al-Naji Mustafa are a source of concern for the SAF.

Additional unease stems from the recent US designation of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, which reinforces claims that the Al-Baraa bin Malik Brigade received training and support from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The brigade has reportedly deployed more than 20,000 fighters in support of the SAF during the war.

Although the government has at times sought to distance itself from militant rhetoric, including public statements by Burhan rejecting attempts by such figures to speak on behalf of the SAF, these efforts have had limited effect. External media

outlets- particularly those linked to the UAE- continue to cite pro-Iranian expressions of support as evidence that Sudan may be drifting toward closer alignment with Tehran.

On the battlefield, however, Abu Dhabi's backing of the RSF appears largely unaffected, despite Iranian missile and drone strikes targeting its own territory. The growing involvement of rival regional powers- through financial, military, and intelligence support- has further internationalized Sudan's conflict, complicating prospects for effective mediation and a negotiated settlement.

Limited Effectiveness of International Mediation

International organizations continue to struggle in an era where multilateralism is increasingly eclipsed by exclusionary bilateral and minilateral engagement. In Sudan, multiple diplomatic initiatives and high-level multilateral efforts have failed to deliver tangible results- reflecting a wider trend that has come to characterize international crisis responses elsewhere. At the same time, the funding required to address Sudan's deepening humanitarian catastrophe remains insufficient, including support for refugees fleeing to neighboring countries.

Although the African Union (AU) and IGAD have repeatedly called for unhindered humanitarian access, a cessation of hostilities, and a civilian-led transition, these efforts have not prevented the continued deterioration of the situation in Sudan. The growing involvement of external actors in the conflict has further complicated the mediation landscape and weakened incentives for compromise, contributing to the lack of genuine commitment to reconciliation by both the RSF and the SAF. As recently as April 2026, separate UN mediation meetings with RSF and SAF leaders, though seen as constructive in international circles, have yielded little tangible progress.

Institutional constraints within the AU have posed additional challenges. Following the October 2021 military coup, the AU suspended Sudan from all of its activities, a move intended to pressure the military toward restoring civilian rule. However, Sudan's suspension has also hindered effective communication between the AU and Khartoum, with the Sudanese military increasingly dismissing the AU's authority as the continent's principal political body. There is hope that the AU delegation's April 2026 visit to Khartoum to discuss reopening the AU office could help improve relations with the Sudanese authorities and strengthen the AU's role in mediation efforts.

Khartoum's relationship with IGAD has been similarly strained. In January 2024, Sudan suspended its membership in the organization after objecting to IGAD's invitation to RSF leader Hemedti to attend a meeting in Uganda- an act Khartoum viewed as a violation of its sovereignty. Though Sudan resumed l participation in the regional bloc recently, IGAD's influence in Sudan continues to be limited by internal divisions among its member states and its reliance on external funding, both of which have inhibited its ability to act decisively.

The EU and the UN's constrained mediation role has become increasingly evident over the past two years. Both actors have largely been relegated to humanitarian assistance and sanctions, rather than exerting meaningful diplomatic pressure. Their capacity to act as independent mediators has been undermined by restricted access on the ground, repeated ceasefire violations by the belligerents, and the absence of a unified external front capable of pressuring the warring parties. What is clear is that the crisis cannot be allowed to continue. Africa- and the international community more broadly- cannot afford to stand by as Sudan unravels. Ending the war is an urgent imperative, which requires tangible efforts toward initiating a credible peace process.

Despite the growing externalization of the conflict, the war in Sudan remains, at its core, a Sudanese, and also an African crisis. Efforts to end the fighting

must therefore be grounded in realistically achievable locally acceptable initiatives backed by a region that realizes that its geopolitical objectives can only be partially realized. The AU and IGAD and key countries must partner to map out a path that global and middle powers buy into for lack of any ideas on their part.

As the conflict escalates and atrocities against civilians continue, the AU may ultimately be compelled to consider the deployment of forces to prevent further violence- an undertaking that would necessitate sustained political, financial, and logistical support from international partners. In parallel, and as grievances deepen across affected localities, the AU should establish a dedicated monitoring and investigative mechanism to document violations against civilians and civilian infrastructure. These efforts should be complemented by the UN through the prioritization of a peacekeeping mission mandated to support a cessation of hostilities, facilitate humanitarian access, and protect civilians and affected communities.

A viable peace process must also be inclusive. The AU and IGAD should therefore prioritize the meaningful participation of CSOs and civilian actors. While maintaining continuous dialogue could prove difficult, the persistence of military rule without civilian representation has repeatedly proven destabilizing. With the support of the UN and the Arab League, the AU and IGAD should simultaneously engage external actors fueling the conflict and press for a reduction in their involvement.

Finally, for the Quad to function as an effective guarantor-cum-mediator, the competing- and at times conflicting- geopolitical ambitions of the UAE and Saudi Arabia must be set aside. The EU, UK, and US are well positioned to facilitate dialogue among the Gulf giants regarding their involvement in Sudan. Revitalizing the Jeddah Agreement should thus constitute the Quad's central objective, providing a credible foundation for renewed ceasefire negotiations and a broader political process.

Similarly, for the Quintet- comprising the AU, IGAD, League of Arab States, EU, and the UN- to be successful, its members must maintain a unified strategy, coordinate their leverage, and avoid parallel mediation tracks that further fragment the peace process. Success also depends on sustained political engagement, clear objectives, and a strong understanding of Sudan's complex internal and regional landscape.

More fundamentally, mediation should not be viewed as an activity limited to formal negotiations, but as part of a broader political landscape shaped by shifting power dynamics, economic incentives, and regional rivalries. Effective mediation therefore requires a deeper engagement with the realities of modern conflicts, including the motivations of armed actors, the sequencing of political processes, and the influence of war economies, while also recognizing when parties are using negotiations tactically rather than sincerely. Even as coercive power increasingly dominates international politics, African mediation initiatives must remain pragmatic and strategically informed without relying primarily on militarized solutions.

Toward A Meaningful Commitment to Reconciliation

The crisis in Sudan is pushing the country to the brink of institutionalized partition. The Sudanese population is growing increasingly frustrated by the lack of any response to the exhortations and condemnations from the international community. The conflict is already drawing in neighbors and supporters from afar with profound implications for peace and security, economic stability, and humanitarian conditions across the Horn of Africa and beyond. The prospects for peace in Sudan- and its wider regional impact- hinge on whether the AU and/or IGAD, with support from the international community, can effectively lead and strengthen the stalled peace efforts into an inclusive AU/IGAD and

Leage of Arab States-led process capable, at a minimum, of silencing the guns.

Ultimately, it is the Sudanese forces and the people that back them who will determine the country's path out of crisis. While the withdrawal of political and material support by foreign backers is necessary, a durable peace must be rooted in domestic commitment. This will require a departure from traditional mediation approaches. The long-standing tradition of Sudanese elites to enter into agreements without the commitment to fully implement them, dating back from the birth of the republic in 1955 has to be brought to a close. A new political and social contract will have to compel recognition of the equality of all Sudanese communities and citizens. Nothing less than that will do. The alternative is partition.

At the core of Sudan's predicament is a historical failure to acknowledge and accommodate the country's social, cultural, and regional diversity. The inability to build a shared national identity grounded in equal citizenship- one that respects distinct histories and cultures- has undermined state cohesion. This stands in contrast to Sudan's often generous reception of refugees from neighboring countries, highlighting a troubling disparity between external hospitality and internal inclusion.

Repeated violations of post-independence political agreements- including the 1956 Transitional Constitution, the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, the 1994 IGAD Declaration of Principles, the 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement, and the 2019 Constitutional Declaration- have directly contributed to the country's current crisis. This pattern has now extended to the battlefield, where multiple ceasefires and peace frameworks have been routinely disregarded.

Amid the ongoing war, some argue that segments of the Khartoum population, angered by the conduct of the RSF, increasingly view separation from Darfur as preferable to coexistence. At the same time, the widespread violence inflicted by the RSF against civilians- particularly in Darfur- reflects deeper structural and societal failures rather than isolated abuses.

The increasing visibility of Islamist militias, alongside the broader militarization of Sudanese society, poses significant challenges for the future of the country's security architecture and the prospects of consolidating disparate armed groups within a cohesive national structure. In the absence of substantive security sector reform and credible disarmament and reintegration efforts, the continued influence of these actors risks prolonging instability and undermining any post-conflict political order.

Yet, Islamist factions are likely to remain a consequential force in Sudan's political and security landscape, and cannot be dismissed in any future settlement. Their organizational networks, social influence, and role in the current conflict make them an enduring factor on the ground. As such, any viable political process will need to account for their presence, even if their inclusion remains contested.

Neither side has demonstrated a credible commitment to negotiations aimed at achieving a durable and inclusive political settlement. While Burhan has named the civilian and former diplomat Kamil al-Taib Idris as prime minister of the army-aligned administration based in Port Sudan, the move is largely seen as symbolic, with little expectation that Idris will exercise authority independent of military influence.

Meanwhile, the RSF has established a parallel authority in Nyala, the capital of South Darfur, placing Hemedti at its head and appointing Mohammed Hassan al-Ta'ishi, a Darfuri Arab politician, as prime minister to lead its cabinet. Additionally, the RSF's political-military alliance, "Ta'sis," lacks recognition from both Khartoum and the broader international community. These trends risk driving the country toward increasing territorial division.

Sudan's crisis demands honest self-examination: acknowledging collective shortcomings, preserving constructive social values, affirming a shared Sudanese identity, and defining a role for Islam that accommodates religious pluralism and governance based on equal citizenship. This is a difficult undertaking, but one that is essential. But in the final analysis, it is critical that there is a way to constrain the role that external parties play in determining the fate of Sudan, which at present appears near decisive.

Sudan cannot afford to squander this moment. Another missed opportunity may foreclose the possibility of a united Sudan altogether.