

THE SKINNY ON SUDAN'S CRISIS

PUBLISHED
6 March 2025

CATEGORY
Civil Unrest

CIVIL UNREST · MARCH 2025

The Skinny on Sudan's Crisis

Background of the conflict

The conflict in Sudan has deep historical, political, and ethnic roots that date back to the country's colonial era and subsequent independence in 1956. Sudan has long been plagued by divisions between its northern and southern regions, as well as between various ethnic groups and political factions. The first and second Sudanese civil wars (1955–1972 and 1983–2005) were largely fueled by disputes over resources, governance, and religious differences between the predominantly Arab-Muslim north and the largely non-Arab, Christian, and animist south.

These conflicts ultimately led to the secession of South Sudan in 2011, but violence persisted in Sudan, particularly in Darfur, where a brutal war erupted in 2003 between government-backed militias (Janjaweed) and non-Arab rebel groups, resulting in widespread atrocities, displacement, and allegations of genocide.

After long-serving autocrat Omar al-Bashir was ousted in 2019 following mass protests, hopes for democracy rose with a fragile civilian-military transitional government. However, tensions between Sudan's army, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), escalated into full-scale war in April 2023. The conflict has devastated the country, leading to mass displacement, severe humanitarian crises, and fears of regional instability as foreign powers and militias become increasingly involved.

Key parties involved

Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF)

Led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the SAF serves as Sudan's official military and has historically been the dominant force in the country's defense and governance structures. The SAF consists of an estimated 200,000 to 250,000 active personnel, making it Sudan's largest conventional military force. The SAF has three branches, including:

- Ground Forces – The largest branch, responsible for land operations, with significant armored divisions, mechanized infantry, and artillery units.
- Air Force – Controls fighter jets, attack helicopters, and reconnaissance aircraft, primarily based in Khartoum, Port Sudan, and key conflict zones.
- Navy – Though smaller, it maintains a strategic presence along the Red Sea, particularly in Port Sudan, securing maritime interests.

Rapid Support Forces (RSF)

The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) evolved from the Arab Janjaweed militia, which has been engaged in ethnic conflicts in Sudan's western Darfur region for over two decades. It is currently led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, commonly known as "Hemedti," who serves as the

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deputy chairman of the ruling Transitional Military Council. The RSF is estimated to have around 100,000 troops, with bases and deployments across the country. Over time, it evolved into a powerful entity parallel to the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), with significant autonomy.

Combat Units:

- Special Forces – Elite units responsible for high-risk operations.
- Infantry Battalions – Core fighting forces deployed across the country.
- Armored & Mechanized Units – RSF has acquired armored vehicles and heavy weaponry.
- Air Defense & Drone Units (Emerging) – Reports indicate RSF's use of drones for reconnaissance and combat.
- Urban Warfare Units – Specialized forces operating in cities, notably during the conflict in Khartoum.
- Military Intelligence Wing – Conducts surveillance, counter-intelligence, and interrogation.
- Cyber & Media Unit – Manages RSF's social media propaganda and online operations.
- Finance & Business Network – RSF controls gold mines, trade routes, and companies in Sudan and abroad.
- Supply & Logistics – Manages arms procurement, fuel, and food supplies.

Foreign Relations & Mercenary Networks

- RSF has links with regional actors, including groups in Libya, the UAE, Russia (Wagner), and Chad.
- Alleged recruitment of foreign fighters and mercenaries.
- Pro-democracy activists and resistance committees opposing military rule.

Regional and International Actors

The global response to the conflict has been varied, with the United Nations calling for a ceasefire and increased humanitarian aid efforts. The United States and the European Union have imposed targeted sanctions on leaders of the RSF and SAF, restricting financial transactions and arms sales. The African Union has attempted to mediate peace talks, though with limited success. Several regional countries, driven by various geopolitical interests, have been actively aiding the warring factions:

- Egypt and Saudi Arabia – Strong allies of the SAF. Egypt has reportedly provided military support, including air support. Saudi Arabia maintains a complex position, supporting the SAF while also sponsoring ceasefire talks in Jeddah and providing humanitarian aid. Saudi Arabia seeks to counter Iranian influence in the region and maintain dominance over the Red Sea, especially as Sudan previously had close ties with Iran.
- United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Chad – Associated with backing the RSF. The UAE has reportedly supplied weapons and engaged in gold trading with RSF-controlled resources. Chad has been accused of complicity, serving as a major destination for Sudanese gold, which it imports and refines. Some reports suggest the UAE has been linked to informal gold trade networks, benefiting from Sudan's vast reserves.

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- Libya, Central African Republic, and South Sudan – Factions within these countries have collaborated with Sudanese militias and the RSF, engaging in arms smuggling and contributing to regional instability.

Casualties and Humanitarian Impact

The conflict has led to a significant humanitarian crisis, with:

- Over 12,000 reported deaths, although actual numbers may be higher.
- More than 10 million people displaced, both internally and across borders.
- Widespread destruction of infrastructure, including hospitals, markets, and water sources.
- Reports of human rights abuses, including mass killings, sexual violence, and forced recruitment of children.

Current Areas of Fighting

Fighting has been concentrated in several key areas:

- Khartoum and Omdurman – The capital city remains a battlefield with heavy urban combat.
- Darfur Region – RSF accused of ethnic cleansing against non-Arab communities.
- Kordofan and Blue Nile – Clashes between SAF and RSF over strategic towns.
- Eastern Sudan – Currently stable but at risk of being drawn into the conflict.

Economic and Strategic Factors

The conflict has been fueled by economic interests, particularly the control of Sudan's gold resources:

- Gold Trade – The RSF, under Hemedti's leadership, has leveraged Sudan's gold wealth for financial power, often bypassing state regulations.
- Foreign Transactions – Investigations revealed that Algunade, a company owned by Hemedti's family, exported millions in gold to Dubai, circumventing state oversight.
- Resource Exploitation – RSF and SAF continue to battle for control of key economic assets, including gold mines and trade routes.

Potential Outcomes

The future of Sudan remains uncertain, with several possible scenarios:

- Prolonged Conflict – A drawn-out war leading to further state collapse and regional instability.
- Military Victory – One side gaining full control, though unlikely in the near term.
- Negotiated Settlement – International pressure forcing a power-sharing agreement, but trust deficits remain.
- Partition or Secession – Sudan could fragment further if the war continues without resolution.

Conclusion:

The Sudan conflict is a humanitarian disaster with no immediate resolution in sight. The international community's role in diplomatic

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mediation and humanitarian assistance remains crucial. Without a sustainable ceasefire and political transition, the country risks descending into further chaos, affecting regional stability.

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