



Overlooked Risks Report: Sudan

Africa Desk
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The far-reaching geopolitical risks stemming from
a largely neglected conflict





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Africa Desk provides pro-bono insights to organisations that aim to make a social impact, as well as general consulting services to companies on the African continent. Specialising in a continent that is often overlooked, we aim to provide a sense of certainty to stakeholders that operate in highly uncertain security, political, regulatory, and operational contexts.

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Executive Summary

- The continuation of mass displacement and increased refugee flows is likely to put increased pressure on humanitarian organisations and possibly instigate conflict in neighbouring countries over resource scarcity.
- With a growing number of foreign powers becoming involved in the conflict, including the UAE, Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Ukraine, there is an increasing likelihood that global tensions may further exacerbate conflict in Sudan.
- The conflict in Sudan has significant potential to instigate physical and economic insecurity in Chad, South Sudan, Libya, and the Central African Republic, and may lead to global supply disruptions.

In April, a power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary organisation Rapid Support Forces (RSF) spiralled into full-blown armed conflict. The groups have not yet come close to agreeing on a peace deal as both belligerents remain motivated by the belief that they can win or extract concessions militarily. No headway was made in peace talks in late December. For General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the SAF - despite very recently claiming the contrary - this calculation may soon change as the SAF continues to lose territory to the RSF. The RSF now controls much of the country's west and south; the SAF, on the other hand, remains holed up in a small part of Khartoum and retains control over a number of regional capital cities in the country's centre and east. If RSF gains continue at this rate, the group could soon attain full control of Khartoum and other major cities.

Civilians have been severely affected by the violence. The UN [estimates](#) that in Sudan, one of the poorest countries in the world, over 24 million people need humanitarian assistance, and over seven million have been forced to flee their homes. Observers have reported atrocities committed by both groups, but the RSF has pursued a particularly brutal [ethnic violence campaign](#) in their newly conquered territories, especially targeting the non-Arab Masalit people. The RSF's human rights abuses, its propensity for ethnic violence, and successive SAF defeats have begun to drive young Sudanese, as well as several ethnic militias, to join up with the SAF -



particularly in the country's centre and east - which could act as a counterbalancing force despite the RSF's recent successes.

The war also has an international dimension with immense implications. The RSF, already backed by the UAE, has been courting the support of multiple states in the region, including Ethiopia, Uganda, and Sudan's civilian government. At the same time, the SAF remains backed by Egypt and maintains good relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Due to the global nature of the conflict and immense refugee flows, this conflict has the potential to have significant global implications for governments, companies, and NGOs should the international response remain as muted as it has been to this point.



Mass Displacement

Key Risks

- Worsening strain on the resources of IGOs and NGOs
- Eruption of conflict in neighbouring countries driven by resource pressures
- Violence against NGOs or IGOs that are seen as favouring certain groups

Sudan's neighbours, in particular Chad, Egypt, and South Sudan, have become hosts to a steadily growing refugee population. Over a million civilians have fled Sudan since April 2023, but the vast majority remain internally displaced. People in the western Darfur provinces, a RSF stronghold, have been especially affected, with over 2.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the region.

Both the [SAF](#) and the [RSF](#) have accused each other of atrocities against civilians; however, [international observers](#) have highlighted the particular brutality of RSF attacks on non-combatants, including an attack on Ardamata, a town in western Darfur, where the RSF participated in a massacre of non-Arab Masalit residents. Survivors reported mass rapes and looting at the hands of RSF militias and verified videos circulating on social media depict the unlawful detention and beating of hundreds of men in the region surrounding Ardamata.

The conflict is likely to put further strain on NGOs and IGOs, which already deal with a severe lack of resources. In [2023](#), 60% of the funding requirements for the UN's humanitarian response went unmet. With the world's focus on wars in Gaza and Ukraine, this number is unlikely to improve in 2024; to date, the 2024 appeal has yielded only 3.1% of necessary [financial requirements](#). The combination of severe population displacement and a lack of adequate healthcare services creates a strong potential for disease proliferation. Cholera and malaria infections have already been reported among refugees and IDPs.

Water scarcity is also exacerbating the situation. Pre-existing issues such as desertification and the relatively low rate of water available for domestic use have been worsened by the conflict. The [destruction](#) of Khartoum's water treatment plant during recent clashes has forced residents to rely on the Nile River, exposing them to disease.



Global Geopolitical Competition

Key Risks

- Exportation of global conflict to Africa
- Further exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis
- Disruptions in the Red Sea (In the medium to long term)

The Leader of the RSF Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo's recent visits to multiple African capital cities demonstrate the key role of foreign interests in the conflict. Several investigations [allege](#) that UAE humanitarian missions in Chad and [Uganda](#) are covertly funnelling weapons and medical supplies to the RSF. Online flight and image trackers have [observed](#) a sharp increase in monthly cargo flights from Abu Dhabi to N'Djamena in 2023, further reinforcing suspicions of UAE involvement.

Although Egypt and Saudi Arabia initially [pressured](#) Chadian President Mahamat Déby to intervene militarily against the RSF, Saudi Arabia's leanings are slightly more obscure. At first glance, the Saudis seem to support the SAF and their leader al-Burhan. However, Hemedti has supplied fighters to Saudi Arabia's coalition force fighting the Houthis in Yemen, and Al-Burhan's government recently [expressed](#) a desire to restore diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia's rival Iran. Recently, [satellite imagery](#) depicted Iranian Mojaher-6 drones being unloaded at SAF air force bases.

Further, Russian planes were spotted [airdropping](#) surface-to-air missiles to the RSF and Ukrainian Special Forces released a video of a captured [Wagner mercenary](#) who had travelled from the CAR. Egyptian soldiers also may remain embedded with the SAF after several were captured in April in Merowe.

The presence of Wagner Group mercenaries in Sudan may also have led to Ukrainian activity in the country, according to a September 2023 [CNN investigation](#) linking a series of drone strikes against the RSF to Ukrainian special forces. Videos have also circulated claiming to show Ukrainian riflemen in Sudan, although an [investigation](#) by Bellingcat was unable to verify their authenticity. Thus, a continuing conflagration of this war carries the risk of the large-scale exportation of global conflict to Africa, which would serve to impoverish further and brutalise African populations.

The role of the Emirates is considerably more complex. The UAE's main motivation in aiding the RSF is gaining access to natural resources, primarily gold. Hemedti's



brother Algoney Hamdam Dagalo runs a web of UAE-based companies - some [sanctioned](#) by the EU - which launder money for the RSF. Emirati economic influence will likely be further bolstered by the construction of a new port in the Red Sea as part of a 6 billion dollar investment [deal](#) between the two nations, which also includes a free trade zone and a \$300 million deposit to the Bank of Sudan - although this agreement is only likely to be seen through if the RSF prevails.

Despite all of this, it remains unlikely that the conflict will lead to significant insecurity in the Red Sea. The SAF retains control over most of Sudan's coast and while clashes have occurred in Port Sudan between the SAF and local militias, the operations of which were [disrupted](#) during the conflict's early days, it remains operational and under SAF control. As the UAE's aid to the RSF is sent overland via Sudan, and the SAF can receive Egyptian aid directly across its border, neither side is incentivised to attack shipping in the Red Sea. This could potentially change if the RSF is able to secure Port Sudan, whose imports and exports are a key [source](#) of the SAF's revenue. Currently, the port is home to an extensive refugee population.



Regional Insecurity

Key Risks

- The initiation or worsening of conflict in Chad, the CAR, South Sudan, and Libya
- Increasing economic pressures on countries that house large refugee populations
- The worsening of conflict in Sudan's southeast
- Oil supply chain disruptions

The conflict has the potential to escalate regionally due to porous borders and neighbouring countries with active interests in the conflict. Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar [supports](#) the RSF, which has sent militiamen to fight with him in Tripoli. According to [sources](#) The Guardian spoke to on the conflict, ex-Sudanese rebels have returned from Libya to Darfur and are currently involved in talks with the RSF in Ethiopia.

While Ethiopia has not backed a side in the conflict, its relations with the SAF remain tense due to historical tensions over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and the SAF's [ties](#) with Ethiopian rebel groups. While it is possible that Ethiopia could take the ongoing war as an opportunity to reclaim El-Fashaga, it is more likely that President Abiy will bide his time at least until a clear winning side emerges. Meanwhile, Sudan's government has [closed](#) the Ethiopian border following a 10-day re-opening period in early January.

Although unlikely in the short term, It is possible that the UAE's activities could lead to internal destabilisation or even a military [coup](#) in Chad. According to CSIS, a number of Chadian generals that belong to the Zaghawa ethnic group - which has close ties to the Masalit ethnic group, whose leaders in Darfur have allegedly been [targeted](#) by the RSF - oppose President Déby's alleged support for the UAE. Chad's military establishment also suspects that the RSF's leader, Mohamed Dagalo, could potentially seek power in Chad if he loses the war in Sudan.

Lastly, South Sudan's oil is carried north into Sudan via two pipelines, which converge at Khartoum - the centre of heavy fighting. A damaged pipeline could cause massive disruption. It is possible that South Sudan could become involved in the conflict if the pipeline is deliberately attacked as oil revenue comprises almost



[90%](#) of its government's income. Oil infrastructure has so far remained untouched, with exports [rising](#) during the conflict's early months. The Dar Petroleum operating company, a South Sudanese company owned largely by Chinese and Malaysian corporations, has consistently shipped over 100,000 barrels a day since the start of the conflict. However, it's improbable that this relatively sunny scenario will last. It is likely that the RSF will eventually target the export terminal at Port Sudan and other oil infrastructure to cut off the SAF's stream of revenue from pipeline transit fees, severely impacting oil exports to China, India, and Malaysia, all of which are heavily invested in the region.



Recommendations & Insights

African and Middle Eastern Governments

African governments should avoid entanglements with the RSF, whose cross-border activities in Libya and Yemen and ruthless pursuit of natural resources make it likely to destabilise other states if it seizes Sudan. In particular, Chad's President should distance himself from the RSF and their Emirati allies to avoid antagonising his country's Zaghawa military elites, thereby exposing himself to an extension of West Africa's coup wave. Likewise, Ethiopia should avoid using the civil war as an opportunity to recover El-Fashaga, as doing so could potentially embroil it in a war on two fronts - if Ethiopia's ongoing tensions with Somalia lead to a conflict in Somaliland. Egypt should continue its support of the SAF, which would provide it with a more stable southern neighbour than Hemedti. The UAE's support for the RSF may be economically profitable, but could ultimately pose diplomatic problems for the Emirates by incurring pushback from nations concerned with Hemedti's humanitarian record.

IGOs/NGOs/Humanitarian Organisations

NGOs aiming to provide aid, especially healthcare, to displaced persons should focus much of their efforts on Chad, which hosts the greatest number of refugees from Sudan. Organisations still able to operate within Khartoum should concentrate on supplying clean drinking water to the city to avert a disease epidemic. Both sides have a poor record regarding working with NGOs. The SAF's Humanitarian Aid Commission (which controls the supply of aid through Port Sudan) and related Supreme Committee for Crisis Management are widely considered tools for controlling aid resources and restricting their shipment to rebel areas. NGOs have reported looting in areas recently captured by the RSF, as well as aid confiscations by the SAF. The RSF has allegedly forced humanitarian workers to participate in propaganda videos and has begun requiring special travel permits for aid workers operating in South Darfur. Further, aid organisations are likely to continue to face operational difficulties in aid delivery presented by telecommunications and internet outages across the country.



While both sides have a poor track record, NGOs may find it easier to operate in SAF-controlled regions as the SAF has more formal governance structures than Hemedti's relatively less sophisticated operations. NGOs seeking to operate in a comparatively safe area that hosts many refugees should consider focusing on Port Sudan; the port's role as a hub of logistics may also allow aid groups to access other areas of the country. NGOs operating in the port should monitor tensions between the army and tribal militias in the city. Organisations seeking to mitigate risk by staying within SAF-controlled regions outside the reach of the front should consider relocating to the states of Kassala, River Nile, Gedaref, Northern, and Red Sea. NGOs operating in areas currently at risk of falling to the RSF, such as Kosti, Rabak, and Ad Douiem in White Nile State, and parts of Khartoum and all Al Jezira state, may be faced with incidental risk resulting from violent clashes and bombing campaigns. Omdurman is also currently the site of heavy fighting due to an ongoing SAF offensive against the rebels, who control a large portion of the city, making it relatively unsafe for foreigners. Aid groups are also advised to use heavy caution when operating in Kordofan, where the RSF has made recent advances.

Foreign Investors

While the situation for foreign oil investors remains relatively stable, companies operating in Sudan are strongly advised to develop evacuation and contingency plans in anticipation of a potential pipeline attack by the RSF. Investors involved in exports should keep a close watch on Eastern Sudan and areas near Port Sudan - any RSF advances could preclude an attack on the Port, affecting shipping. The outlook for the mining industry is more complicated; the Meyas Sand Gold project's location in the far north makes it unlikely to be attacked, but chromite mines in Blue Nile State's Ingessana Hills are located much closer to the scene of conflict. The Hassai Gold Mine's location 50 km from the front in Khartoum may also place it at risk. The mining industry is particularly at risk, given the RSF's history of mineral exploitation. Some multinational companies had previously relocated to Wad Madani, which became the headquarters of Sudanese multinational conglomerate DAL and 15 other companies that left Khartoum due to security concerns. However, the RSF captured Wad Madani in December.



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