Chapter 2

ORIGINS AND CAUSES OF SUDAN'S CONFLICT: DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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The war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and its subsidiary paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) that began in April 2023 follows a succession of civil wars that devasted the economically marginalized, socially ostracized, and politically disenfranchised southern and western regions of Sudan, but it has now brought the conflict to the country's geographic and economic power center. Unlike the decades-long North–South civil wars or the ongoing deadly conflict in Darfur, today's conflict began in Khartoum and the agriculturally rich heartland of Central Sudan, bringing death and destruction to the central Aj Jazirah and Sennar states, before moving south and west to Darfur and Kordofan. The same historical, economic, political, and ethnic factors that fueled those previous conflicts are at play now, as the belligerent factions seek to control the country's resources. This time, however, after working together to halt efforts to democratize Sudan, the SAF and RSF turned on each other, each seeking to dominate the kleptocratic state system.

The tripartite capital of Khartoum, Khartoum North, and Omdurman, which is now largely decimated, expanded over decades of rural–urban migration waves spurred by ill-advised development policies and the wars in the peripheral states. By the 2020s, this metropolis was home to an estimated 7 million people. The SAF and RSF have waged their fiercest battles in these densely populated cities, engaging in street fights and artillery duels and using the Air Force and armed drones. This urban warfare has destroyed decades of investment in commercial and industrial assets and the supporting energy and telecommunications networks.

Sudan's protracted conflicts are rooted in mismanagement of ethnic and regional divisions (see Thomas 2009), competition over resources, and the insatiable appetite of ruling elites for control of natural resources in the country's marginalized peripheries. In this chapter, we summarize the long history of these conflicts and the entrenchment of the kleptocratic system, and then look in more depth at the impact of the current war. These sections examine its impact on the economy and community survival mechanisms, divisions

within Sudan, and the response and objectives of neighboring countries and major powers. The chapter concludes with some thoughts on escaping the cycle of crisis and conflict and moving forward in Sudan.

Political regimes, war economies, and food crises in Sudan: 1956–2025

Structural inequities in the distribution of power and wealth between Sudan's dominant elites (primarily drawn from the central and northern riverain regions) and the population in peripheral areas are at the core of the country's chronic instability and repeated violent conflicts. These inequities are compounded by bitter identity disputes, rooted in the failure of successive post-independence governments to effectively manage Sudan's rich ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. Instead of fostering inclusion, successive ruling elites have imposed Arabic language and culture, as well as a specific interpretation of Islam, as the country's official identity, while also fomenting conflict among groups at the local level (Mohammed 2000).

Initially, the modernizing influences of education, mass media, and state administration supported the gradual "Sudanization" of the population, defined as the consolidation of varied traditions into a unified and distinctive national identity (Iyob and Khadiagala 2006). However, the more radical and coercive policies of Islamization and Arabization implemented by the regime of Omar Al-Bashir (1989–2019) exacerbated divisions through the educational curriculum, state-controlled mass media, and, in areas of resistance, aggressive military force. These policies led to the 2011 secession of South Sudan, a region that had been home to a third of the country's population. This long history of marginalization, identity-based conflict, and disregard for human rights continues to frustrate Sudan's struggle for peace and stability.

A brief timeline of events since Sudan's independence in 1956 illustrates the country's chronic instability. These decades have been marked by a recurring cycle of short periods of civilian rule interrupted by military coups, then followed by popular uprisings that restore democratic governments—only for the military to seize power again. Throughout this turbulent period, state policies have generally favored those with political connections and geographic advantages. Power remained concentrated in the hands of elites from northern and central Sudan, who benefited from state-led agricultural schemes, infrastructure (such as the large-scale irrigation projects), and access to markets, while small farmers, tenants, and laborers remained marginalized (Berridge et al. 2022).

1956–1969: Fragile civilian rule and early military centralization

Sudan's first experiment with parliamentary democracy (1956–1958) unfolded with its independence under Prime Ministers Ismail al-Azhari and Abdallah Khalil. The new state inherited a mixed economy built around the colonial era's Jazirah irrigation scheme in central Sudan and cotton exports, but structural inequities and southern marginalization quickly generated rebellion. The First Civil War (1955–1972), which began even before independence, drained resources and disrupted agricultural production in the South.

A military coup in 1958 brought General Ibrahim Abboud to power. Abboud inaugurated a centralized, state-led development policy and early industrialization projects. However, assimilationist policies toward the South and the neglect of peripheral economies fueled hardship and insurgency. The October Revolution of 1964, consisting of a civil disobedience campaign spearheaded by opposition groups including trade and student unions, forced Abboud to hand over power to their representatives. This initiated a one-year civilian transition and led to an elected government months later, but the transitional rule was marked by political fragmentation, weak fiscal management, and continued conflict.

In terms of agriculture, the 1956–1969 period saw the expansion of government irrigation projects, such the Managel Extension of the Jazirah Scheme and Khasm Al-Girba project, while private owners consolidated their holdings in the rainfed mechanized farming areas, particularly in Gedaref state (Ali 1989).

1969–1985: Nimeiri's shifting economic models and renewed war

The May Revolution of 1969 ushered in the long rule of Colonel Jaafar Nimeiri, whose policies oscillated between socialism and neoliberal reform. Initially, his regime pursued nationalization and state control over key industries (1969–1977), which disrupted private agricultural enterprise and centralized food supply chains. Following IMF-led reforms in 1978, economic liberalization policies prioritized export crops and austerity, which undermined rural livelihoods and food affordability. Foreign investments, mainly from Arab sovereign funds and private businesses, and joint ventures in the agricultural sector increased considerably, favoring the expansion of large-scale rainfed and irrigated mechanized farming (Ali 1989). This expansion came at a cost for small-scale subsistence farmers. Not only did these farmers receive little or no state support for productivity improvements, but also the expansion of mechanized farming often displaced them from their lands, thus reducing their food security and forcing them to join the growing population of rural–urban migrants.

In 1972, the Addis Ababa Agreement ended the First Civil War and brought a decade of relative stability and agricultural recovery to the South. However, Nimeiri's 1983 unilateral abrogation of southern autonomy and imposition of Sharia laws in the entire country reignited the conflict, triggering the Second Civil War (1983–2005). The Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) emerged in 1983 under southern commanders frustrated by the central government's betrayal of the Addis Ababa Agreement. Key among their motivations was the protection of the South Sudanese right to benefit from resources in their region, namely the newly discovered oil and water.

The renewed fighting devastated farming regions, leading to prolonged food crises, and redirected state resources toward war, laying the foundations of a militarized and extractive economy. Mounting hardship led to Nimeiri's ouster after a countrywide civil disobedience campaign led by students' and workers' unions in April 1985.

1985–1989: Fragile civilian transition and economic crisis

The transitional government under General Abdel Rahman Swar al-Dahab, as head of a sovereignty council overseeing a technocratic government appointed by trade unions and opposition parties, and the elected government of Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi that followed faced a collapsing economy burdened by external debt and austerity measures. Market liberalization without institutional reform deepened inequalities, while the continuing war against the SPLM/A consumed scarce resources. Food insecurity intensified amid drought and displacement, culminating in the famines of the 1980s, the worst in a generation.

At the peak of the second North–South civil war, in 1988, Northern Bahr al-Ghazal state (now in South Sudan) suffered a famine that ranks as one of Sudan's worst manmade humanitarian disasters. Tens of thousands died and hundreds of thousands more were displaced. Relentless government bombardments destroyed the subsistence farming and livestock livelihoods of the predominantly Dinka local communities and caused the collapse of their markets, leaving them vulnerable to famine even as food aid was blockaded. The government's weaponization of hunger and the involvement of some SPLM commanders and traders in diverting food and manipulating exchange rates for their own benefit resulted in devastation that prompted the international community to launch Operation Lifeline Sudan in 1989 (Keen 1994).

Political paralysis in the central government paved the way for the Islamist-backed coup of June 1989.

1989–2019: The Bashir era—Islamization, oil economy, and structural famine

The Inqaz (Salvation) Regime of Omar Al-Bashir, backed by the National Islamic Front, transformed Sudan's political economy into a fusion of military control, ideological Islamization, and economic patronage.

In the early 1990s, international isolation and blanket economic and trade sanctions imposed by the United States (following its designation of Sudan as a supporter of international terrorism) forced a cycle of extreme austerity and a turn toward self-sufficiency and state monopolies, while war expanded into Sudan's resource-rich peripheral areas. The sanctions generally increased food insecurity by blocking agricultural inputs and discouraging export markets. However, large exports of oil beginning in 1999 shifted the economy toward petroleum, spurring growth and urban consumption but deepening regional disparities.

Under Bashir's regime, an elaborate kleptocratic system of governance developed, using violence to maintain control of national wealth, and dispensing its proceeds to those in the inner circles of power at the cost of rural populations (Lanfranchi and Hoffman 2023). This kleptocratic system is a primary driving force in all Sudan's civil wars, and conflict has remained endemic as a result. The regime represented a sophisticated iteration of what Alex de Waal refers to as the "military-commercial complex" that dominated Sudan during the colonial as well as the postcolonial periods (De Waal 2023). The kleptocracy—deeply embedded in state institutions, the security establishment, and further entrenched through aggressive ideological propagation—survived the fall of Bashir and his ruling National Congress Party in April 2019, following months of pro-democracy protests, and its influence within state institutions remains pervasive today.

Bashir's era was one of never-ending wars, and periodic droughts and displacement compounded food insecurity across the peripheral states. In 1991, a major setback was dealt to southern unity when a leadership split within the SPLM/A divided the movement along Dinka, Nuer, and Shilluk lines, triggering interethnic factional fighting whose legacy still shapes tensions in South Sudan. During the 1990s, as intra-South wars intensified, the New Sudan Council of Churches, supported by the Sudan Council of Churches and tribal elders, launched people-to-people peace processes that helped restore relations among warring factions and communities (Bradbury et al. 2006). "Peace markets" later emerged across frontlines, sustaining trade and livelihoods despite government attempts to suppress them (Rolandsen 2019).

In the "Three Areas" of Abyei, the Nuba Mountains, and Southern Blue Nile—geographically northern but culturally and politically allied with the South—rebellion that lasted from the mid-1980s to 2011 reflected shared marginalization and grievances.

In the late 1990s, eastern Sudan, the Beja Congress, and the Free Lions of the Rashaida tribe joined forces under the Eastern Front, aligning with the Eritrea-based National Democratic Alliance to challenge the Bashir regime. Fighting involved sabotage, raids, and landmines, causing severe civilian suffering. Although a series of agreements have incorporated provisions for the East, many of eastern Sudan's deep-rooted grievances over exclusion and underdevelopment remain unresolved.

As prospects for peace in the South improved after 2002, Darfur, another marginalized region, rose up to demand inclusion. In Darfur, insurgents protested exclusion, inequitable development, and the manipulation of land and tribal systems, leading to a devastating conflict that killed about 300,000 and displaced more than 2.5 million between 2003 and 2007. While violence ebbed after 2008, a series of peace accords—including the 2020 Juba Agreement—were poorly implemented, though local "tribal peace conferences" achieved limited reconciliation. However, following South Sudan's secession in 2011, unresolved questions about forces that fought as part of the SPLM/A (known as the SPLM-North) reignited conflict in the new southern regions of the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile, marked by aerial bombardments, displacement, and the use of ethnic militias.

These various conflicts served as sustained militarized extraction systems that enriched elites while impoverishing agrarian communities. During the Bashir regime, state development policies were largely designed to preserve the ruling coalition of Islamist businessmen and security elites rather than to promote equitable growth. Resource extraction from Sudan's peripheries financed projects that reinforced this alliance.

The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) formally ended the 22-year civil war in South Sudan, one of the longest and deadliest in the continent. Built around North-South power- and wealth-sharing arrangements, the CPA granted South Sudan regional autonomy during a six-year period. Southerners voted for independence in the 2011 referendum, leading to the secession of South Sudan and Sudan's loss of 75 percent of the oil reserves and revenue.

Anticipating the economic shocks that would result from the secession of South Sudan, Bashir's Finance Minister Abdelrahim Hamdi warned that elections and possible secession threatened the regime's hold on power. He

proposed rapid, large-scale investment in the sparsely populated "geographical North," arguing that improvements in infrastructure and employment there would consolidate the ruling National Congress Party's electoral base. Hamdi's proposal evolved into state policy, channeling major infrastructure, agricultural, and hydroelectric investments—largely financed by Chinese loans—into the North, East, and Center, an area critics dubbed the "Hamdi Triangle." Research by the AidData Lab shows that the bulk of Chinese development finance between 2000 and 2011, Sudan's revenue taken from the South during the "Oil Decade," was directed to these regions (Roessler 2013; Verhoeven 2015). This spatial concentration reflected a deliberate political calculus to reward loyal constituencies and strengthen regime control over core territories.

After South Sudan's secession in 2011, the loss of oil income triggered economic collapse, currency crises, and recurrent food price shocks. The secession stripped Sudan of more than half its fiscal revenue and 95 percent of its exports. This loss undermined the regime's patronage system, weakened its grip on security institutions, and led to the adoption of extreme austerity measures. As economic conditions deteriorated, grassroots networks of youth and women—the Resistance Committees—emerged to provide community support and mutual aid, operating quietly but effectively under severe economic and political repression.

These committees evolved into resilient, horizontally organized structures that could survive government crackdowns. Through widespread training, debate, and coordination, they built a movement grounded in transparency and equality. When professional associations and opposition parties joined forces with them in the last quarter of 2018, the resulting alliance—the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC)—led mass demonstrations, strikes, and sit-ins that culminated in the December Revolution and signaled the regime's loss of legitimacy. Bashir's 30-year regime was overthrown in April 2019.

2019–2023: Transitional hopes and renewed breakdown

The Transitional Government (2019–2021), comprised of both civilian and military leaders under Abdalla Hamdok and SAF commander Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, sought economic stabilization through subsidy reforms and reengagement with international institutions. Their democratic shift and reform measures paved the way for Sudan's removal from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism and the lifting of remaining economic sanctions. The short-lived 2020 Juba Peace Agreement, which the transitional government signed with remnants of Darfur armed movements, promised regional integration but proved difficult to implement.

In October 2021, a coup staged jointly by the SAF and the RSF ended civilian participation, returning Sudan to military rule under Burhan and the RSF commander, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo Hemedti. The joint SAF/RSF coup was aimed at ending far-reaching macroeconomic reforms initiated by the transitional cabinet, which threatened the military's control of multiple sectors of the economy.

FFC dissident factions, eager to have a place in the coup government, paved the way for the coup by calling on the army to take power. Sudan's Islamist Movement's hardliners, other stalwarts of Bashir's ruling party, and business barons also mobilized their constituencies in favor of the coup. The new regime relied increasingly on gold exports, smuggling, and rent-seeking, intensifying informal war economies that inflated food prices through illicit taxation and restricted access to basic goods.

Relations between the SAF and RSF, however, were not as close as their joint interventions to derail Sudan's transition to democracy suggested. Despite the SAF's role in establishing the RSF in 2013 as a proxy counterinsurgency force and building it into a de facto parallel army by training, arming, and equipping its fighters, signs of latent tensions between the two forces built up for years. A key factor was the fierce rivalry between the SAF's enterprises and the private family businesses of the RSF commanders for control of ever-expanding shares in key sectors of the economy, including the mining, agricultural, livestock, construction, and banking sectors (Cartier et al. 2022). Further, Hemedti's personal political ambitions had grown as the RSF gained prominence as Bashir's favored force. Hemedti was particularly concerned about the return of the Islamists, who blamed him for Bashir's ouster in 2019, to influential positions in the state apparatus, which he denounced in several public speeches.

With signs in 2022 that the coup partners were rapidly hurtling toward a head-on collision, civilian FFC leaders and former transition partners of the military stepped in, joining mediation efforts led by the Sudan missions of the United States, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to reduce the tensions and prevent an imminent conflict. These efforts were coordinated with those of the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in the Sudan, the African Union, and the subregional Intergovernmental Authority on Development.

A Framework Political Agreement reached in these negotiations and signed in December 2022 stipulated the establishment of a civilian-led government during a two-year transition period and the military's exit from politics. Coming shortly after a process that civilians initiated to ease the exit of the military from political control neared its conclusion, the Framework

Political Agreement contained the seeds of its own failure as it required the integration of the RSF into the SAF but left responsibility for this to the military. Tensions between the SAF and RSF escalated during the first quarter of 2023 over disagreements about the timeline for integrating the RSF into the national army and the place of the top RSF commanders in the chain of command after the integration. The RSF commanders feared the loss of their political influence and the financial autonomy that came with it. Ultimately, these tensions erupted into yet another civil war.

2023–2025: The SAF–RSF war and the collapse of national markets

The outbreak of full-scale war between the SAF and RSF in April 2023 marked the fragmentation of the state and the near-total collapse of formal economic governance. As the conflict spread from Khartoum and the central states to Kordofan and Darfur, food systems disintegrated: transport routes were cut, irrigation schemes abandoned, and grain markets captured by armed actors.

By mid-2025, SAF offensives had reestablished control over Khartoum, Jazirah, and Sennar, while the RSF entrenched itself in Darfur and parts of Kordofan. These territorial divisions, coupled with ad hoc taxation and looting, entrenched a de facto partition of Sudan into competing war economies, each sustaining its forces through coercive resource extraction. The result has been one of the world's most acute and widespread food crises—rooted not in drought or global shocks, but in Sudan's recurrent wars.

The war economy and its impact on community survival mechanisms

The ongoing war has bred a destructive economy, where warring factions and their allied forces exploit the population and natural resources to finance their military campaigns. Their predatory practices include various forms of violence against civilians, which are systematically destroying traditional survival strategies and conflict resolution mechanisms that communities have relied on for generations to navigate natural and manmade crises.

Compounding this devastation are growing polarization and societal divisions, fueled by the spread of propaganda and hate speech on social media, which are eroding the country's social fabric. This loss of societal cohesion not only deepens the immediate humanitarian crisis but also poses a long-term threat to the prospects for reconciliation and recovery.

Pressures created by the warring parties, including prevailing insecurity, diversion of food aid, and several forms of large-scale corruption that directly impact food production, have led nearly 12 million people to flee their homes (UNHCR 2026). A majority of these internally displaced people are food producers and service providers who have abandoned their subsistence agriculture and trade in surplus products and are now dependent on the generosity of host communities and international humanitarian relief, when the warring parties allow humanitarian supplies to reach them.

Rampant misappropriation of humanitarian supplies intended for the people displaced by the warring parties and other armed actors has aggravated the famine conditions and serious food insecurity now prevailing in large regions of Sudan. Attacks on humanitarian convoys and workers by the belligerents have multiplied, and volunteers staffing community kitchens are often targets of harassment, arbitrary detention, and killings (STPT 2024).

Perhaps the most egregious and crude means of financing Sudan's war is the massive and systematic looting by RSF fighters of valuables, including four-wheel vehicles and gold jewelry that Sudanese families use as savings. As occurred in the Central African Republic during the 2013 military campaign that helped place the rebel Seleka movement in power, the RSF offensive to conquer Khartoum and other areas has turned into a massive campaign of plunder. According to media reports, stolen vehicles have found their way to South Sudan, Chad, and other countries of the Sahel, creating an illicit market sustained by the decimation of the savings of Sudan's middle class. In Khartoum, there have been successive waves of looting of factories, businesses, and empty private residences.

War booty motivates RSF fighters to seek new targets and discourages them from establishing any form of governance or service provision in the areas they occupy. For example, in the relatively rich farming communities in Aj Jazirah state, RSF fighters established protection rackets, requiring farmers to provide the fighters with food supplies to avoid violent repression.

Another key source of revenue, particularly for the RSF, has been extortion of payments at checkpoints and other forms of illegal taxation in the areas under its control. For example, businessmen who moved goods and machinery from Khartoum to Aj Jazirah and other stable states at the beginning of the current war were able to do so only after making large payments to the RSF commanders for safe passage of the cargo and personnel.

Pragmatic exchanges between SAF- and the RSF-controlled areas have occurred throughout the war. For instance, shortly after the conflict's outbreak, the RSF laid siege to El-Obeid, the capital of North Kordofan and

home to Sudan's largest exchange for agricultural products, and engaged the SAF garrison there in frequent skirmishes. However, fuel, consumer goods, and medicine continued to flow to El-Obeid from both SAF and RSF areas, while dozens of trucks loaded with agricultural products and livestock left the city daily for sale in markets in the SAF-controlled areas and for export to international trade partners. In addition, petroleum products smuggled from Libya reached El-Obeid.[1] However, the RSF set up tollgates to demand payments from commercial and passenger vehicles traveling to and from the city.

Like El-Obeid, the town of El-Dabba in Northern state has become a crucial hub for commercial exchanges between the SAF-controlled northern and eastern states and the RSF-controlled western states. Its strategic and relatively secure location led to a surge in commercial activities following the outbreak of the war. Relief agencies moved their warehouses to the city, using it as a base for distributing food supplies to conflict-affected areas. This shift created new employment opportunities. Meanwhile, the El-Dabba Chamber of Commerce, under the guise of collecting fees in cash and in kind for supporting the war effort, assumed tax collection powers typically held by state and municipal authorities, despite being managed by volunteer supporters of the SAF. The added financial burden forced an unknown number of traders and transporters to seek ways to evade the payments or to abandon their work.

Since the start of the war, the livestock sector has been damaged by looting, the lack of inputs including feed and vaccines, displacement from grazing areas, and disruptions in the supply chain. Most of the key production areas are now in RSF-controlled areas, but final export markets are largely in SAF-controlled areas. SAF companies have maintained significant livestock exports, but in many cases, they are selling animals raised in RSF-controlled areas and the RSF has been able to extract considerable illicit revenues for their transport.

As a result of these wartime exchanges, livestock exports—mainly to Saudi Arabia and Egypt—were thriving, earning a record US$879 million by July 2024, during the 15 prior months, despite the destruction of Sudan's largest industrial, commercial, and infrastructure enterprises (Nougud 2024). However, many exporters failed to repatriate and deposit the mandatory percentage of their overseas sales back into Sudan, prompting the Central Bank

1 Information drawn from frequent author phone interviews with El-Obeid residents, May 2023–October 2024.

of Sudan to issue an ultimatum to approximately 250 companies. These firms were instructed to comply with export regulations or risk being removed from the registry of exporters. The ultimatum's effectiveness may be limited, however, given that the largest exporters of livestock and processed meat were companies controlled by the SAF and influential traders closely aligned with the military (Al-Rakoba Editors 2024).

Economic partition in the making

As this chapter went to press, a de facto territorial divide was consolidating in Sudan, with both the SAF and the RSF establishing civilian governments in their respective areas of control. Battlefront developments in the second half of 2024 rapidly shattered the commercial and trading activities between the SAF- and RSF-controlled areas. The disruption of these exchanges poses a direct threat to the national economy and humanitarian interventions, adding to the survival challenges facing the millions of people displaced by the war.

SAF's air force repeatedly bombed large markets in the towns of El-Daein, Nyala, Mellit, Kebkabia, and al-Kuma in a campaign apparently meant to disrupt commercial activities in RSF areas, among other objectives. The airstrikes have killed and injured hundreds of civilians, and destroyed commercial assets in the targeted towns. The RSF alleged that Egypt was providing air support to the SAF and retaliated in October 2024 by imposing an embargo on export to Egypt of 12 commodities produced in western Sudan, including sesame, groundnuts, gum arabic, sorghum, millet, livestock, and gold (Sudan War Monitor 2024).

As prices of the banned commodities fell rapidly in RSF-held areas in Darfur and Kordofan, farmers, traders, transporters, and workers in these value chains suffered great losses. The impact of the export ban in El-Dabba was equally devastating. The number of trucks leaving El-Dabba to Darfur averaged 30 to 40 trucks per day but fell to an average of 12 to 16 per day after the ban. Most of these trucks traveled to East Darfur and West Kordofan states, and a few went to the once-busy trading hub of Mellit in North Darfur. Insecurity on the road to Mellit and repeated SAF airstrikes on the town and its market forced most traders and inhabitants to abandon the town.[2]

In May 2025, the RSF looted gum arabic valued at approximately US$75 million from the El-Nuhud market and other production hubs.

2 Information drawn from author messaging with a key informant in El-Dabba.

The cumulative value of stolen gum arabic alone is estimated at around $150 million, demonstrating the RSF's capacity to sustain its war effort through large-scale plunder and illicit trade. The RSF has also financed itself through the systematic theft of other valuable commodities, notably agricultural produce and copper stripped from electric cables and transformers (Craze and Makawi 2025).

The gum arabic seizure illustrates how the war is disrupting supply chains and pushing foreign buyers to seek new sources; long-time suppliers in Sudan now face competition from exporters in Chad, Kenya, and South Sudan. However, through such operations, the RSF has consolidated control over trade routes and revenue streams, reinforcing its influence in contested territories (Craze and Makawi 2025).

In addition, in late 2024 and early 2025, the RSF acquired more sophisticated militarized drones that it used to destroy large electric power transformers in the SAF-held northern and eastern states, including in Merowe and Dungla in the Northern State and other cities across SAF-held areas, including Khartoum, triggering outages in several states.

The Central Bank of Sudan's introduction of new banknotes in denominations of 500 and 1,000 pounds in November 2024 can be seen as part of the SAF's economic warfare against the RSF. The Central Bank justified the measure as a means to counter widespread forging of older notes as well as the looting of large amounts of cash from banks and freshly printed bills from the Currency Printing House when it was occupied by the RSF at the beginning of the war (Sudan, CBoS 2024). The Central Bank also required the public to deposit their holdings of old bills in existing or new bank accounts in a step to encourage the use of digital money. Since there have been no operating banks in RSF-held areas since the beginning of the war, the RSF rejected the Central Bank's policy categorically and instructed populations in areas under its control to continue using the old banknotes while it prepared to introduce a basket of currencies, including the dollar, for financial transactions (Ismail 2024).

Millions of people are facing severe survival challenges due to the widespread insecurity and turmoil in Sudan described above. However, there are also signs of resilience. Building on the networks developed in the resistance to Bashir, thousands of Sudanese youth and women have come together to create emergency response rooms to meet the needs of their neighbors. With support from Sudanese communities abroad, and increasingly from private and international donors, they provide food, medical care, and other much needed services.

Broader implications and international perspectives

The conflict has exacerbated Sudan's humanitarian crisis, forced millions to flee their homes, and created instability across the region. Neighboring nations such as Chad, South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Egypt are struggling to manage the spillover impacts, including the influx of refugees and rising cross-border tensions.

Thus, the war in Sudan has transformed the country into a stage for competing regional and international powers, all seeking to assert their influence in the East Africa and Greater Horn of Africa regions as well as across the Sahel. Fighters from Chad and the Sahel have joined the RSF, while Ethiopian Tigrayan refugees were reportedly recruited by the SAF. As the conflict drags on, external powers have increased their involvement. The UAE has provided substantial military and logistical support to the RSF, while countries including Iran, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia—each pursuing their own strategic goals in Sudan, the Horn of Africa, and the Red Sea—have backed the SAF and the Port Sudan government that is under SAF's control. These nations are also motivated by their reliance on Sudan for resources critical to their economies.

Sudan's strategic importance is further underscored by its 853 km coastline along the Red Sea, a vital international trade route. Russia has provided economic, military, and diplomatic support to the Port Sudan government, anticipating that Sudan will honor a 2017 agreement to grant it a naval base on the Red Sea, signed during former President Bashir's state visit to Moscow. Similarly, Iran is seeking to establish a foothold on the Red Sea, consolidating its influence in the region. Its existing support for the Yemeni Houthi rebels already gives it a disruptive presence in this vital waterway. Meanwhile, the United States and its allies are likely to focus on countering Russian and Iranian ambitions, viewing Sudan as a weak link that could enable these adversaries to expand their reach.

In September 2025, the Quad platform—comprising the United States, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE—launched a new peace initiative, proposing a roadmap to address Sudan's escalating crisis. The plan envisioned a phased approach, beginning with a three-month ceasefire designed to facilitate a large-scale surge in humanitarian relief operations and to ensure greater protection for civilians trapped in conflict zones. Given the influence these regional and international actors wield over the warring parties, there was cautious optimism that their combined diplomatic pressure might secure a temporary cessation of hostilities (Baldo 2025).

However, the prospects for translating such a humanitarian truce into a sustained political process appear far more uncertain. The initiative's next phase—anchored in a Sudanese-led dialogue among civilian and local stakeholders to shape a postwar political order—faces formidable challenges. Years of war, entrenched militarization, and deep political fragmentation have eroded the foundations for consensus. Achieving an inclusive settlement that dismantles the military and security establishment's grip over Sudan's political and economic spheres will thus require not only external mediation but a coherent, unified civilian front capable of articulating a shared national vision for the country's future.

Concluding remarks

Sudan's recurring descent into conflict reflects deep structural patterns in its political economy, where exclusionary governance, militarized resource extraction, and institutionalized inequality have repeatedly undermined peace and stability. From independence to the present war, successive regimes have benefited small elite coalitions while marginalizing the rural and peripheral majority. This entrenched structure has produced cycles of rebellion, repression, and humanitarian crisis, perpetuating both political instability and chronic food insecurity. The current war between the SAF and RSF represents the latest—and most destructive—manifestation of this legacy, as rival militarized elites turn the instruments of state violence and economic predation inward to sustain their competing war economies.

The devastating humanitarian toll, with millions displaced and widespread famine looming, underscores that hunger in Sudan is not merely the product of environmental or logistical failure but the predictable outcome of deliberate sociopolitical choices. The destruction of markets, looting of resources, and manipulation of aid flows characterize a war economy sustained by exploitation rather than governance. Yet, amid this devastation, local networks of youth, women, and diaspora groups continue to demonstrate resilience and solidarity, offering a fragile foundation for any future reconstruction.

The inadequacy of international responses—marked by slow diplomacy, fragmented mediation, and muted media attention—has further entrenched the crisis. Regional powers and global actors have pursued competing strategic interests rather than a coherent peace agenda, contributing to Sudan's de facto partition and prolonging civilian suffering. Ultimately, sustainable peace will require a complete reconfiguration of Sudan's political economy: dismantling

the military-commercial complex, redistributing power and resources, and rebuilding governance from the community level upward.

Only by addressing these structural inequities and confronting the war economy that has defined its modern history can Sudan move beyond its cycles of collapse and recovery toward a durable, inclusive peace. In this effort, food systems must be rebuilt by dedicating more state resources and investments to traditional subsistence farming, environmental protection, and the improvement of access to markets.

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