



## Introduction

In 2010, there was only one Sudan. A year later, after more than two decades of bloody war, part of the country became independent as South Sudan. In 2025, there are three Sudans, as, in the heat of the war in Sudan, the paramilitaries of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have established a government parallel to the Sovereign Council in Darfur<sup>1</sup>, and South Kordofan.

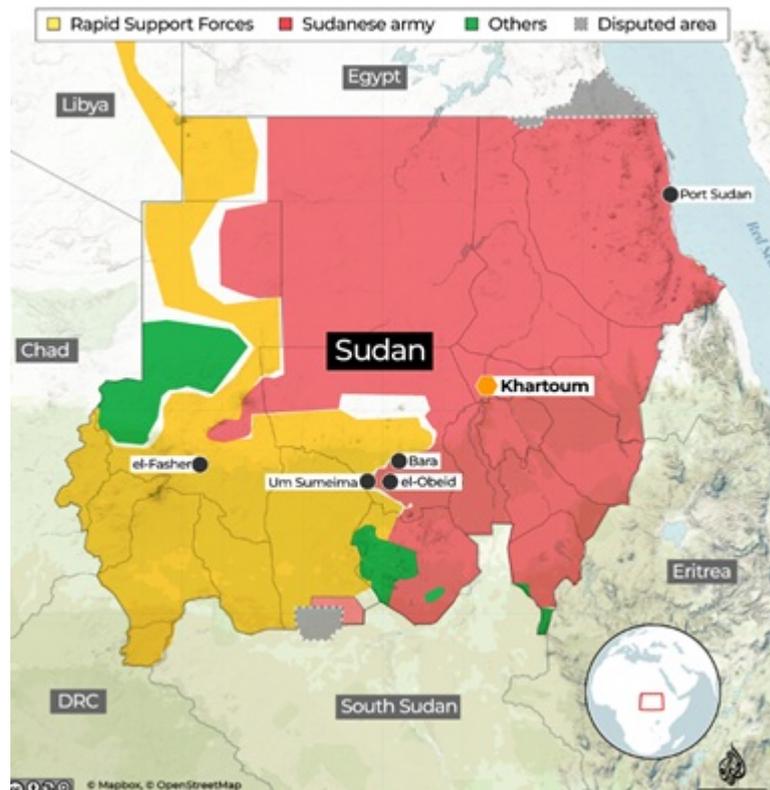


Figure 1. Situation of the war in Sudan in September 2025. Source: Al Jazeera

Before the secession on 9 July 2011, Sudan was a country with an area twice the size of the Iberian Peninsula and was the largest country on the African continent. Its ethnic and religious diversity practically divided the country in half: with an Arab and Islamic north and a largely Christian and animist south. Its situation is reminiscent of that of Nigeria,

<sup>1</sup> Except for the city of El Fasher, at the time of writing.

with the notable exception that the chances of it splitting are practically non-existent, as it has a stronger central government and there is no significant separatist movement.

For its part, Sudan, like South Sudan, does not have a stable government, so the conflict is tied to the role of two opposing leaders. Neither of them has a healthy economy either, since, although Sudan's was more favourable than that of its southern neighbour, after more than three years of civil war, it is now in a state of collapse. This has a huge impact on South Sudan, as it needs its neighbour's infrastructure to export oil, on which it is 90% dependent (Energynews, 2024).

Back in 2004, long before the division of Africa's largest country, journalist Deborah Scroggins explained that she had always thought that to understand the 2003 war in Sudan, one needed a map with different layers (Scroggins, 2004). The layer with the political conflict, that of religious division, that of ethnic groups, that of clans and tribes, languages, economic differences and resources, colonial divisions, and so on, until it became clear at a glance that this is not one war but many.

In the current war that is bleeding Sudan dry, this complexity, expressed by the image of a map with multiple overlapping layers, remains perfectly valid. This chapter is not structured according to this separation, which follows the structure of this collection of the Geopolitical Panorama of Conflicts, but, as it could not be otherwise, the elements to which it refers are taken into account and considered.

This work analyses the situation in Sudan, with the necessary references to its southern neighbour, given its immense influence on it. The armed conflict in Sudan is considered in terms of its form and substance. It also considers, on the one hand, the international community's lack of attention to this war, but also the opposite attitude on the other.

### **Background to the conflict**

Sudan gained independence from the Anglo-Egyptian condominium in 1956, but since then it has found neither peace nor freedom. In almost seventy years of independence, it has suffered a long list of armed conflicts, with only ten years of peace. It has suffered twenty coup attempts (seven of them successful) and has been the African country with the most incidents of this type; it has experienced three civil wars and at least one

genocide. The country was split in two with the independence of South Sudan and is currently also divided by the ravages of war. With so many armed conflicts, it is natural to find a very high number of peace agreements, with up to 46 having been signed, although these can be considered unsuccessful given the almost incessant presence of war.

A prime example of this is the First Civil War, which shook the country from before its independence, from 1955 to 1972. Its end did not bring peace, but rather a continuation with the Second Civil War between 1983 and 2005. This second armed conflict resulted in the independence of South Sudan in 2011. The new country has not been blessed with peace either.

While the eyes of the world are on Gaza and, increasingly less so, on Ukraine, Sudan is bleeding in another civil war, its third, which entered its third year last April and for which peace is not in sight. The spectre of Sudan's tendency to wage two-decade-long civil wars has been revived. Furthermore, the danger of the war spreading to its southern neighbour and even to the region is high, as will be analysed in this paper.

In April 2019, a military coup ended al-Bashir's long rule. A military dictatorship then began, with the goal of holding free elections in 2024. The country was, supposedly, at the beginning of the current civil war, in a period of transition until the elections.

This coup was followed by an agreement between the Transitional Military Council and the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) to form a government. Abdalla Hamdok was appointed prime minister on a temporary basis, as the aim was to hold democratic elections at the end of 2022. These elections never took place because, in 2021, the army overthrew Hamdok and established a Sovereign Council. This coup was orchestrated by General Abdel Fattah al Burhan, head of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), together with Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as 'Hemedti', commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Allies then, enemies now in the current conflict that is bleeding the country dry.

The RSF is an offshoot of the Janjaweed militia, or at least many of its members joined the RSF. The so-called Janjaweed are a mercenary group composed of members of nomadic Arab tribes who fought sedentary population groups over land and resources in Darfur. During the conflict in that region, which took place from 2003 to 2020, the Janjaweed became a powerful militia under al-Bashir's command. This militia is accused of having been responsible then, and again now, for many of the deaths in Darfur.

In April 2023, differences of opinion over how to integrate the RSF into the SAF chain of command escalated into civil war. The background to this is the power struggle between the two leaders, and the way in which their forces were to be integrated had a huge influence on which faction would control the country. Their deep mistrust and ambition quickly led the country into open armed conflict in the form of civil war.

Although the spark that ignited the conflict was the power struggle, in the background we can find the layers referred to by Deborah Scroggins and mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: politically and economically marginalised communities, religious division, previous wars that ended in stalemate, and other differences in a country with extreme polarisation.

### **Current situation of the conflict**

Before the war began, much of the country was ravaged by poverty and constant famine. Three years into the war, things have worsened dramatically. Currently, the World Food Programme estimates that a total of 24.6 million people (approximately half the population) suffer from severe food insecurity<sup>2</sup>. Nearly 650,000 people face catastrophic levels of hunger. This is the highest figure in the world.

The United Nations (Speakman Cordall, 2025) estimated in mid-September that approximately 40,000 people have died in the fighting since the start of the war. Nearly 13 million have fled the country.

If Sudan enjoyed peace, it would certainly not be one of the poorest countries in the world. Its oil reserves make it the 54th largest exporter of this fossil fuel in the world<sup>3</sup>. The war has brought crude oil exports to a screeching halt, not only in Sudan but also in South Sudan. Its southern neighbour depends on Sudan for its crude oil exports, which are transported to the Red Sea via Khartoum. Other products on which the Sudanese economy depended for exports, such as cotton, gum arabic and sugar, have also suffered the setbacks of war.

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<sup>2</sup> Data available on the website: [Sudan | World Food Programme](#).

<sup>3</sup> Data taken from The Observatory of Economic Complexity. Available at: <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/crude-petroleum/reporter/sdn>

Three years after the war began, it continues to be ignored by international opinion despite the high risk of genocide, the thousands of deaths, and the fact that it is the world's largest humanitarian crisis. The violence continues to escalate with indiscriminate attacks on civilians, the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, and famine affecting millions of people. The regions of Darfur and Kordofan are the epicentres of the conflict.



Figure 2. Displaced woman refugee in the city of Tawila, in North Darfur. Source: Reuters

If one had to define the type of armed conflict ravaging Sudan, it would be an internationalised civil war, as has become common in this century. Internationalised civil wars are a recent categorisation. This refers to a conflict involving organised violence by two or more sides within a sovereign state, in which foreign elements play a role in instigating, prolonging or exacerbating the fighting (Jenne and Popovic, 2017). In this case, there are countries that have so many interests in this war that, for this reason, neither side is exhausted and neither defeat nor victory is achieved.

When thinking about two sides and talking about civil war, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking about a population divided and pitted against each other by two political options. The reality, however, is a population trapped and powerless, marginalised, so that what we see is violence between two political leaders and their soldiers. This violence is

sometimes deliberately and directly directed against the population, as is the case in Darfur. According to Human Rights Watch, the United States Government declared last January (Human Rights Watch, 2025) that the RSF had committed genocide in this region<sup>4</sup>. This would be the second genocide in Darfur in just two decades and, once again, another chapter that has been largely ignored by the international community (Palacián de Inza, 2024).

In addition to this, United Nations agencies certify that war crimes and all kinds of atrocities against the population are taking place in the country, including rape, executions, the use of hunger as a weapon of war and the persecution of minority groups. Children are not spared from these atrocities and also suffer from being used as combatants and sexual violence (United Nations, 2024).

Sudan is an example or archetype of the new regional conflicts where local and international dynamics increasingly intersect and humanitarian crises are exacerbated and aggravated by geopolitical rivalries and tensions (Shea, 2024).

External countries are involved in civil war either directly or indirectly, which is more common. The shipment of weapons, troops and even intelligence gathering, for example, are some forms of support. The evidence seems clear. One example is Amnesty International's report entitled *New Weapons Fuelling the Sudan Conflict* (Amnesty International, 2025), which documented the transfer of newly manufactured weapons to Sudan and its surroundings from countries such as China, Russia, Turkey and the UAE.

It should be noted that while countries near and far have their eyes, and sometimes their weapons or money, on Sudan, European, , and North American public opinion, if not global opinion, is oblivious to this war and so many others beyond Gaza and Ukraine. Some go even further, such as *The Guardian* columnist Jonathan Freedland, who states emphatically: "Remember when we said Black Lives Matter? We didn't mean it"<sup>5</sup>.

In line with this exclusion of other races, religions or ethnic-linguistic groups from our attention, Yemeni-Swedish journalist Luai Ahmed spoke at the United Nations Human Rights Council earlier this year:

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<sup>4</sup> "Genocide": the systematic extermination or elimination of a human group on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, politics or nationality. [Genocide | Definition | Dictionary of the Spanish Language | RAE - ASALE](#).

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/oct/11/world-humanitarian-disaster-sudan>

"[...] I ask the UN, the Arab League and all those who have been raising the Palestinian flag since 7 October: Where is the flag of Yemen? (...) And Sudan? In less than two years, more than 150,000 people have died. Where is the flag of Sudan? [...] Where is the Syrian flag?"<sup>6</sup> .

Another explanation for the deadly neglect of the war in Sudan may be that when reality cannot be divided into good and bad, victims and perpetrators, it is preferable to ignore it (Freedland, 2024).

Be that as it may, this negligence in not paying attention to certain armed conflicts will have a price to pay, first and foremost with thousands of irregular migrants in search of peace (Shea, 2024). Or it could lead to the overthrow of other regimes in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa; or Sudan could become another sanctuary for terrorists or exacerbate the crisis in the Red Sea (The Economist, 2024).

At the time of writing, Sudan is divided as shown in Figure 1. The division of the country corresponds to the territories controlled by one general or another. According to Marc Lavergne<sup>7</sup> , a specialist in the Horn of Africa, this is a battle between two elites embodied by General al-Burhan and General Hemedti. According to this author, it is a conflict between the political-military elite established in the centre of the country and the emerging militarised elite in Darfur. The object of the conflict is control of the state (Corbeta, 2023).

In this regard, steps are being taken to establish a parallel administration independent of the Sudanese government. To this end, Hemedti has appointed a prime minister and a presidential council headed by himself, with SPLM-N leader Abdelaziz al-Hilu as his deputy (Sudan Tribune, 2025). The SPLM-N (Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North) allied itself with the RSF in February (López Martín, 2025).

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<sup>6</sup> Statement by Luai Ahmed, Yemeni and Swedish journalist, at the 58th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council. 27 February 2025. Full statement available at: [When Arabs kill millions of Arabs, no one bats an eye: Yemeni activist slams UN - UN Watch](#).

<sup>7</sup> Prof. Marc Lavergne, Emeritus Senior Researcher, National Centre for Scientific Research, Department of Arab and Mediterranean Studies, University of Tours (France).

In return, the Sudanese army has sought the support of South Sudanese militias to fight the SPLM-N and the RSF along their shared border (Nashed, 2025).



Figure 3. Drawing by Nairobi artist Galagoly. Source: Instagram

### Role of external actors

Sudan, due to its location between Africa and the Middle East and its rich natural resources (fertile land and a variety of livestock, oil, gas, gold and water), is a strategic point of interest for regional and global powers.

Unsurprisingly, these interests are reflected in the current conflict. This makes Sudan an exceptional example of the form that new regional conflicts are taking. It is a kind of local and international dynamic that mixes and feeds back into itself (Shea, 2024).

Sudan thus becomes essential to the interests of third countries such as Russia, China and, in particular, the United Arab Emirates. Without a doubt, the involvement of international forces contributes to the prolongation of the conflict and delays the chances of reaching a ceasefire agreement.

Saudi Arabia also has an interest in Sudan's strategic location on international trade routes. This is established in Saudi Arabia's *Vision 2030*<sup>8</sup>.

Russia appears to be supporting both sides in the conflict (Sánchez-Rey Navarro, 2024). However, this dynamic may change, as it was al-Burhan who granted permission to build the naval base in Port Sudan (Sanjurjo, 2024). Putin had been coveting this enclave since 2017 (Sánchez-Rey Navarro, 2024). It will be Russia's first base in the Red Sea and will allow it to position warships and nuclear submarines in this strategic sea. This will strengthen its military presence in Africa and its regional influence. There is no doubt that Russia now has a clear idea of which side in Sudan needs to win the Sudanese conflict.

The United Arab Emirates has long collaborated with the RSF both militarily and commercially. Alongside them, the Libyan National Army and Chad also support Hemedti.

On the opposing side, supporting the SAF, are Egypt, Eritrea, Ukraine, Turkey, Qatar and Iran.

The United States and Europe are focused on other wars, so their involvement in the Sudanese conflict is almost non-existent, except for President Trump's recent peacemaking efforts. Together with Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Egypt (which form a group known as "The Quad"), he is pushing for peace proposals for Sudan. However, the latest peace proposal has come from the Muslim Brotherhood (Speakman, 2025), key players in the conflict who support the Sudanese army with the help of Iran. A future Sudan influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood would be a possibility that North African

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<sup>8</sup> In this document, the Red Sea Project is a Saudi Arabian megaproject that aims to diversify its sources of wealth by reducing its dependence on oil through the development of other sectors, notably tourism. [Saudi Vision 2030](#).

and Gulf countries, which have labelled them as terrorists, fear, but which the West seems to ignore.

The armed conflict in Sudan has had a particular impact on its southern neighbour, and will continue to do so. As in Sudan, the visible faces of the conflict in South Sudan, which is not yet armed, are those of two opposing leaders: President Kiir and Vice-President Machar. According to Alan Boswell, these two politicians are responsible for the situation in the country, but there is a third party, if another actor can be considered: the war in Sudan (South Sudan Voices, 2025). Over the last two years, there have been several moments of tension between the two leaders, but the difference now is the pressure of the war in the neighbouring country. In this sense, "Sudan and South Sudan, despite their separation, remain closely linked"<sup>9</sup> socially, politically and economically. Therefore, if the war in Sudan cannot be stopped, the pressure for it to break out in South Sudan will be greater. And if that happens, it will be very difficult to separate the two conflicts.

## Conclusions

The armed conflict in Sudan has been going on for three and a half years. The numbers of dead, displaced or seriously food insecure are very high. However, this armed conflict is being ignored by many, while others have too much interest in it. Both positions are contrary to peace and will affect not only neighbouring countries in vulnerable situations, but also those further afield.

The underlying problems fuelling the armed conflict in Sudan are obscured by the apparent struggle between two leaders with their own agendas. For fifty years, peace processes have been followed by further war in Sudan, suggesting that the causes behind the fighting are not being addressed. In the era of disorderly multipolarity in which we find ourselves, other national actors are an indispensable part of multipolarity. Peace is more sustainable with greater participation. It is essential that other actors from civil society across the country, such as women, young people and religious leaders, participate in the peace processes.

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<sup>9</sup> Rome Nyagoah Tut Pur: in South Sudan Voices, 2025.

In any case, none of this seems possible when wars are internationalised, as those who support one side or the other prevent the conflict from running its course and coming to an end. Worse still, it could spread, as the war in Sudan could destabilise Chad, Somalia, Ethiopia, the Sahel and countries further afield in the Horn of Africa and East Africa, as is in fact happening.

It is possible, however, that among the countries that fuel the conflict because they have interests in it, there may be one that can help bring it to an end. Russia, after signing the agreement to have a base in Port Sudan, may now have an interest in the country achieving peace and in the victory of General al-Burhan, with whom it has signed the agreement.



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