

# Sudan: At the crossroads of chaos





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## INTRODUCTION

**A**frican proverb suggests that “when elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.” In mid-April, fighting broke out in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces, who are broadly loyal to Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces, under the command of Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti.

Hundreds of people have been killed and thousands injured, though the true scale of the suffering is impossible to ascertain against the current backdrop of chaos in the country.

The fighting has been years in the making, almost as if the political tectonic plates had been steadily building up tension, only to suddenly slip and unleash the seismic shocks of a geopolitical earthquake on the country.

Beyond the failure of the country’s body politic to peacefully resolve its differences — an important historical context to remember here is that Sudan has endured 35 coups since gaining independence in 1956, 17 of them successful<sup>1</sup> — there has also been a wider international failure to prevent yet another conflict in a part of world already struggling to contain existing hostilities.



SF fighters wave assault rifles as they cross a street in the East Nile district of greater Khartoum where they claim to have seized a major oil refinery and power plant. Rapid Support Forces/AFP

The full consequences for the country, and the needs of its people, are not yet clear. But what we can say with certainty is that this conflict comes at a time when the global humanitarian architecture is experiencing historic levels of overstretch. The effects of this shortfall in capabilities and resources ultimately will be felt by the most vulnerable people in Sudan.

This research paper provides a snapshot of the country’s pre-conflict dynamics and assesses the main scenarios for what might happen next, through a humanitarian lens.



*An all-out civil war would almost inevitably have regional dimensions and send shock waves through Africa*



## PRE-CONFLICT DYNAMICS

In 2022, Sudan experienced its worst humanitarian crisis in years, with 15.8 million people, a third of the population, in need of humanitarian assistance. Of those, about 12 million people were living with acute hunger. About 12 percent of the country’s 22 million children were going without enough food each day.

Globally, the number of people facing acute food insecurity has soared, rising from 135 million to 345 million since 2019, and leaving 49 million people in 49 countries teetering on the brink of famine.

As a recent Arab News analysis explained: “For years, Sudan’s humanitarian situation was in a precarious state due to decades of sanctions, economic deterioration, intercommunal violence, extreme weather events linked to climate change, and political turmoil<sup>2</sup>.”

The country’s geographical location places it in proximity to other conflict-affected or otherwise fragile states. Sudan hosts an estimated 800,000 South Sudanese refugees and 330,000 refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea, Syria, Ethiopia, the Central African Republic, Chad and Yemen.

Meanwhile, global human-development

As Sudan faces its worst humanitarian crisis in decades, many people who are sheltering in place are seeing their supplies dwindle and internet access cut off. AFP

indicators have been trending negative for some time. The World Bank estimated that the proportion of the world’s population living on less than \$2.15 a day rose from 30.6 percent in 2021 to 32.3 percent in 2022. Last year’s humanitarian appeal for donations to respond to the needs this creates was only 40 percent funded.

This lack of funding should be set in the context of record-breaking humanitarian need. During an appeal in December 2022, the UN called for \$51.5 billion of donations. The calculations for its “Global Humanitarian Overview” showed that 339 million people are in need of assistance in 69 countries, an increase of 65 million compared with the same time last year.

The displaced people living in Sudan are part of an estimated global population of 100 million who have been forcibly displaced. The highest number on record, it represents about 1.27 percent of the world’s population and is equivalent to the number of people in the 14th most-populous country.

Meanwhile, conflicts are becoming more complex, fought by more adversaries in more urban areas and over longer periods. The average ongoing conflict in the mid-1980s lasted about 13 years; by 2021 that average duration had increased to 20 years<sup>3</sup>.





Left: Due to “an unprecedented form of fighting” that makes ground support impossible, the World Food Programme (WFP) is airdropping food aid to villages around the country. Right: The conflict has forced many Sudanese refugees to cross into neighboring countries, such as Chad, in order to receive aid kits and humanitarian support. AFP



## EVACUATION OVER PREVENTION

Peace-making appears to be a lost art. Instead, as we saw in Afghanistan ahead of the fall of Kabul in August 2021, much of the focus of the international community in the early stages of emerging conflicts is on evacuating citizens.

The scramble by nations in recent weeks to get their citizens out of Sudan does at least mean the eyes of the world have been on the country, and that substantial assets are deployed in the region.

Yet the withdrawal of so many international experts — and watching eyes — from the country feels like the last glimmer of twilight before total darkness descends.

A substantial driver of the international evacuation effort has been what the US Institute of Peace described as “an unprecedented form of fighting<sup>4</sup>.”

Not all conflicts involve the same types of violence. In Sudan, the focus among the warring factions has been on the capital, Khartoum, an urban setting in which one of the parties to the conflict enjoys air superiority and the other seeks to hide among the complex maze of homes and other buildings where people live and work.

UNICEF has reported that the fighting is having a devastating effect on children. At least nine have been killed since the clashes began and more than 50 have been injured.

There have also been reports of sexual and gender-based violence, the victims of which



*This conflict comes at a time when the global humanitarian architecture is experiencing historic levels of overstretch*

have included aid workers. Five aid workers have been killed and civilian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, have been badly hit.

The use of explosive weapons that can damage large areas rips at the very balance of delicate and interdependent city utilities. This is a phenomenon that predates, and is not limited to, the current escalation of military tensions in Sudan.

The number of civilians killed or injured by bombing and shelling in urban areas around the globe soared by 83 percent in 2022, according to a recent report by the Explosive Weapons Monitor<sup>5</sup>. The increase was driven largely by the increased use of explosive devices by Russian forces in Ukraine, and escalations in Ethiopia, Myanmar and Somalia.

With Sudan’s international airport closed, many people in the country who are sheltering in place are seeing their stockpiles of supplies dwindle at the same time they are losing power and access to the internet, further isolating them.

Residents talk of being stuck at home in baking, 40-degree-Celsius heat with no electricity and, sometimes, no water. Endre Stiansen, the Norwegian ambassador to Sudan, described the urban warfare in Khartoum as “unprecedented<sup>6</sup>”.

The humanitarian effort to get lifesaving aid to those who need it most during a conflict is always hardest at the beginning of escalating violence because of the mismatch between





Sudanese military ousted former president Omar al-Bashir after months of deadly protests triggered by a decision to triple the price of bread. AFP

dwindling security and the exponential growth in need.

In the face of violence that has little to do with logic or reason, humanitarian agencies in Sudan are having to suspend operations that have been in place for decades, at the exact moment they need to be scaled up. Experienced professionals who have worked throughout many conflicts are being forced out of the country and, as a result, the most immediate phase of the response will surely rest on the shoulders of brave, local representatives of Sudanese organizations.

The World Health Organization said that many hospitals and the country's central public health laboratory have been occupied by armed groups, and it warned that it expects "many more" deaths in Sudan as a result of disease outbreaks, lack of access to food and water, and disruptions to essential health services, including immunization<sup>7</sup>.

The UN's coordinator in Sudan, Abdou Dieng, said about 60 percent of healthcare facilities in the country have closed down or been destroyed<sup>8</sup>. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that rampant looting is making humanitarian operations virtually impossible.

The fact that talk about relief efforts in Sudan has moved so quickly to the establishment of humanitarian corridors, a development that has traditionally been a last resort during protracted conflicts, is a sign of

how bad things have gotten so quickly.

Put simply, it is hard to develop a humanitarian response in such a dangerous and fluid situation.

### WHAT NEXT?

The international community must strive to chart a political course that progresses from the current short, only partially observed, 72-hour ceasefires toward longer, more-sustained spells without violence. Only then will the hundreds of thousands of Sudanese who have had to endure the unendurable in recent weeks be able to contemplate a respite.

As Stephen Walt, a columnist for US news publication Foreign Policy, once wrote: "Wars are easy to start and hard to end. Misperception, sunk costs, escalation, and internationalization all make conflicts last longer than planned<sup>9</sup>."

There are many tools available in the geopolitical toolbox to help enable international actors to move toward ending the violence, other than merely prioritizing evacuation operations. A consensus within the UN Security Council, admittedly a rare occurrence, would be a start.

Discussions around concepts such as the "responsibility to protect" doctrine could signal that the world is unwilling to let a country tear itself apart. The doctrine, which marked its 15th anniversary in 2020, "embodies a political commitment to end the

worst forms of violence and persecution<sup>10</sup>."

Similarly, putting serious thought and early commitment into the creation of a peacekeeping force would doubtless be factored into the calculations of the two Sudanese generals leading this bloody dance.

The history of the conflict in Darfur, and the African Union Mission in Sudan, although not without its critics, are at least reminders that there are precedents for having peacekeepers on the ground in the country.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which together with the US and UK have mediated political negotiations in Sudan, are among the states many will look to at this critical moment.

Yet such has been the path of this conflict that, while all that can be done must be done to avoid further bloodshed, the prospect of even more violent scenarios must also be prepared for. The rhetoric from both sides has been of "fighting to the end," which is perhaps why the UN warns the conflict could cause "immense suffering for years."

In its most contained form, an escalation of the conflict could result in an all-out civil war that remains within Sudan's borders. The International Crisis Group has warned that "the combat could quickly slide into a sustained war that risks rippling through Sudan's restive peripheries — embroiling countless armed groups and communal militias<sup>11</sup>."

But the Royal United Services Institute, a defense and security think tank in the UK, has cautioned that the conflict "could become a new regional flashpoint; regional mediation initiatives are possible, as is increased intervention by regional players — all of which is complicated by Russia's involvement in the region."

An all-out civil war would almost inevitably have regional dimensions and send shock waves through Africa. But, again, the severity and type of the effects could vary hugely.

Regional players, in particular neighboring countries including Egypt, Chad, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Eritrea, should avoid supporting either of Sudan's warring factions. Jeff Feltman, a former US special envoy for the Horn of Africa, publicly warned that such support in the region for one general or the other could "hypercharge" the situation.

Meanwhile, a looming displacement crisis is taking shape in a country that already hosts a great number of refugees and is situated next to conflict-affected states such as Libya, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia and South Sudan.

As many as 20,000 people — among them Chadians, Sudanese and other foreign nationals — have already entered Chad, a country that shares a 1,400-kilometer border with Sudan<sup>12</sup>.

The UN has stated that it is preparing for up



Bashir was toppled in 2018 after three decades in power. During that time, he was convicted by the ICC of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in Darfur. AFP

to 270,000 people to flee from Sudan to South Sudan and Chad<sup>13</sup>. Looking to the north, it is estimated that between 2 million and 4 million Sudanese people live in Egypt, which might encourage many more to flee there if the fighting in Sudan persists or escalates.

The worst-case scenario is a full-scale civil war with regional and international dimensions, transforming a power struggle between two men into a source of regional and global tensions played out at the expense of 45 million Sudanese.

Already, the types of weapons used by each side tell stories of their ties to other countries. For example Wagner Group, a Russian private paramilitary company, now notorious as a result of events in Ukraine, reportedly has been active in Sudan since 2017 with the primary aim of securing resources for Moscow<sup>14</sup>.

How strained US-Russian relations are affected by events in Sudan will be a crucial test of whether the conflict has the potential to pull in international actors.

All possible scenarios, from civil war to regional or even global war, need to be considered by policymakers as they attempt to keep pace with the rapidly evolving situation in Sudan.

Yet, uncertainty over how the conflict might develop must not distract from the immediate needs of the Sudanese people. Aid organizations and UN agencies will soon strive to adapt their postures and programs so that they can operate where possible inside Sudan and along the country's borders.

If they are to save as many Sudanese lives as possible in the weeks or months ahead they will need international attention to remain focused on the conflict, and for UN appeals for funding to be fully met.



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