ISSUE BRIEF

INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES ISLAMABAD
Web: www.issi.org.pk
Phone: +92-51-9204423, 24
Fax: +92-51-9204658

WAR IN SUDAN: GEOPOLITICS AND HUMAN SUFFERING

By
Areeba Arif Khan
Research Associate
Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA), ISSI
Email Address: areebakhan@issi.org.pk

Edited by
Amina Khan

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

The capture of Al-Fashir, the capital of North Darfur, by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on 26 October 2025 marked a significant escalation in Sudan's civil war.[1] Al-Fashir was the last major urban centre in Darfur not under RSF control, and its fall consolidated RSF dominance in western Sudan. Reports indicate that hundreds of civilians were killed during the offensive, with some estimates suggesting more than 400 deaths in the immediate aftermath.[2] Tens of thousands of residents have been displaced, seeking refuge in surrounding towns and across Sudan's borders, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. Humanitarian agencies face severe restrictions in accessing populations due to ongoing hostilities, insecurity, and the deliberate targeting of infrastructure. Hospitals, water facilities, and markets have been damaged or rendered inoperable, leaving civilians without essential services. The fall of Al-Fashir highlights not only the intensification of the conflict but also the vulnerability of Darfur's population to prolonged violence, starvation, and disease.

1 "Sudanese Paramilitary Enters Army's Last Stronghold in Darfur," *The Washington Post*, October 26, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/10/26/sudan-rsf-el-fashir-darfur/

2 "People Fleeing Al-Fashir in Sudan Are in a 'Disturbing' Condition, Aid Group Says," *Reuters*, November 6, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/people-fleeing-al-fashir-sudan-are-disturbing-condition-aid-group-says-2025-11-06/.

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Conflict Background

The conflict in Sudan, which erupted in April 2023, is a power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the RSF, commanded by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti. Initially framed as an internal struggle for power, the conflict has deepened as regional and international actors became increasingly involved. Both factions rely heavily on armed militias, airstrikes, and artillery to control urban centres and rural areas, intensifying the humanitarian toll.[3] Over the past two and a half years, the war has resulted in more than 150,000 deaths and displaced over four million people, creating one of Africa's most severe crises.[4]

Sudan's geography and resources amplify the conflict's stakes. Controlling roughly 500 miles of Red Sea coastline, Sudan is strategically located along a major maritime route connecting the Middle East, Africa, and global markets. Its fertile agricultural land, significant gold deposits, and status as the world's leading producer of gum arabic underline the economic stakes of the conflict.[5] Sudan's control of portions of the Blue Nile also positions it as a pivotal actor in regional water diplomacy, particularly in relation to Ethiopia and Egypt.

Foreign Powers and their Interests

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) role in Sudan is generally viewed as part of its broader regional strategy aimed at securing trade routes, economic partnerships, and geopolitical influence in the Red Sea region. UN expert reports have mentioned the UAE in connection with supply chains linked to the conflict, including cases where some munitions found in Darfur were traced to earlier UAE exports.[6] Other reports note that RSF-associated commercial entities operating from Dubai facilitated gold sales from Hemedti-controlled areas, contributing to the group's financial resources.[7]

Cairo has supported the SAF, seeing Burhan's forces as the legitimate authority capable of maintaining Sudan's sovereignty. Egypt's engagement is influenced by concerns over Nile water security stemming from the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), as well as the broader

3 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Sudan Situation Update: Darfur Region*, November 2025, https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-situation-update-darfur-region-november-2025.

4 "War in Sudan Has Claimed More Than 150,000 Lives, UN Says," *CNN*, November 5, 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/11/05/africa/sudan-war-death-toll-un-report-intl/.

5 International Crisis Group, *Sudan's Civil War: The Struggle for Darfur and the Role of External Actors*, Report No. 332, November 2025, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/sudans-civil-war.

6 "UAE Faces Growing Outrage over Support for Paramilitary in Sudan," *Washington Post*, **Nov. 15, 2025,** https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/11/15/uae-sudan-rsf-support-backlash/

7 Ibid.

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humanitarian and economic impact of a destabilised Sudan. Stability in Sudan ensures alignment with Egyptian strategic objectives and mitigates risks of domestic dissent inspired by democratic developments.[8] Egypt has provided diplomatic support, intelligence cooperation, and military exercises in coordination with SAF units.

Riyadh publicly advocates a negotiated solution, co-sponsoring peace initiatives with the United States. Saudi priorities include maintaining security along the Red Sea, safeguarding trade routes, and ensuring regional stability.[9] Saudi Arabia has played a key role in evacuating foreign nationals during periods of intense fighting and continues to emphasise humanitarian assistance while encouraging ceasefire agreements.

Moscow has pursued influence in Sudan through paramilitary engagement, primarily via the Wagner Group. Wagner reportedly supplied the RSF with arms and personnel in exchange for access to gold concessions.[10] Russia has also maintained contact with the SAF to negotiate strategic advantages, including the establishment of a naval base at Port Sudan. Russian involvement illustrates how local conflicts can become platforms for advancing global geopolitical ambitions and accessing resources.

Western and US Engagement

Western engagement in Sudan has been a combination of humanitarian diplomacy, political advocacy, and multilateral coordination. A prominent example is the London Sudan Conference held on April 15, 2025, co-chaired by the United Kingdom, the European Union, France, Germany, and the African Union. At the conference, Western donors pledged substantial humanitarian assistance, including over €522 million from the EU and £120 million from the UK, aimed at mitigating the humanitarian crisis caused by ongoing hostilities. The co-chairs' statement emphasized support for a "peaceful, united, democratic, and just future" for Sudan, alongside the protection of civilians and respect for the country's sovereignty.[11] Despite these commitments, the conference did not succeed in establishing a formal contact group for ceasefire negotiations, highlighting the persistent divisions among international actors and the limitations of diplomatic interventions in the context of the ongoing civil conflict.

8 "Sudan War: Could Involved Foreign Powers Stop the Killing," *Deutsche Welle*, DW, October 31, 2025, https://www.dw.com/en/sudan-war-could-involved-foreign-powers-stop-the-killing/a-74574524.

9 Ibid.

10 "War in Sudan Has Claimed More Than 150,000 Lives, UN Says," *CNN*, November 5, 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/11/05/africa/sudan-war-death-toll-un-report-intl/.

11 "London Sudan Conference 15 April 2025: Co-Chairs Statement," UK Government, April 15, 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/co-chairs-statement-on-the-london-sudan-conference/london-sudan-conference-15th-april-2025-co-chairs-statement

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U.S. engagement has combined coercive measures with diplomatic initiatives. Early in the year, the U.S. formally determined that the RSF had committed acts amounting to genocide in Darfur, accompanied by targeted sanctions against RSF leader Hemedti and affiliated entities. This designation reflects the application of international legal frameworks to influence behavior in the conflict.

Overall, Western and U.S. engagement illustrates a strategic balance between humanitarian assistance and political leverage. While substantial financial resources have been mobilized to address immediate human suffering, efforts to institutionalize mechanisms for sustained conflict resolution have been limited. The inability to translate financial commitments into effective and enforceable ceasefire arrangements underscores the complexity of the Sudanese conflict environment, the multiplicity of domestic and regional actors involved, and the challenges facing external powers in influencing conflict dynamics.

Regional and Humanitarian Implications

The conflict has profound regional consequences. Refugee flows to Chad, South Sudan, and Egypt have created significant humanitarian and economic pressures. Cross-border insecurity has increased, while fragmented governance has allowed illicit trade, arms proliferation, and armed group activity to thrive. Sudan's Red Sea corridor has become an arena of competition among Gulf states, Egypt, and Russia, underscoring Sudan's strategic importance in broader regional calculations.[12] Control over Sudan provides leverage across the Horn of Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, underlining the conflict's significance beyond national borders. Humanitarian agencies warn of worsening food insecurity, malnutrition, and disease outbreaks, reflecting the urgent need for coordinated intervention.

Peace Efforts and Ceasefire Initiatives

Peace initiatives in Sudan have intensified following the capture of Al-Fashir. On 6 November 2025, the RSF officially announced their acceptance of a humanitarian ceasefire and political roadmap proposed by the U.S.-led Quad, comprising the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt.[13] The plan, initially proposed in September 2025, outlines a three-month humanitarian truce to allow safe access for civilians, establish aid corridors, and reduce immediate violence, followed by a nine-month political transition aimed at creating a civilian-led government.

12 African Union Peace and Security Council, *Communiqué on the Situation in Sudan*, November 2, 2025, Addis Ababa, https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20251102/psc-communique-sudan.

13 Ibid.

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The RSF expressed readiness to engage in discussions on the arrangements for cessation of hostilities and the principles guiding the political process. The SAF welcomed the initiative but conditioned their full participation on the RSF withdrawing from densely populated areas and disarming heavy weapons. As of now, the truce remains largely in principle, with fighting continuing in multiple regions, humanitarian access severely constrained, and the broader political transition yet to commence.

International and regional actors continue to engage diplomatically to ensure compliance with the truce and to prevent further civilian suffering. Efforts focus on establishing humanitarian aid corridors, temporary ceasefire zones, and mechanisms for negotiations between the RSF and SAF.[14] The Quad's involvement reflects the combined goal of mitigating human suffering, stabilizing key strategic areas, and creating conditions for a sustainable political settlement. The international community has also emphasized accountability for atrocities committed in Darfur and other affected regions, highlighting that long-term peace in Sudan requires both political engagement and humanitarian interventions. These actions demonstrate an approach that blends moral authority, coercive pressure, and diplomatic facilitation to influence conflict dynamics, though the implementation of the truce faces significant challenges due to ongoing hostilities, divergent strategic interests of external actors, and the entrenched positions of the warring factions, underscoring the fragility of Sudan's current situation.

Conclusion

Sudan's war illustrates the tight connection between domestic instability and foreign influence. The capture of Al-Fashir and other strategic towns has intensified civilian suffering and solidified RSF control, highlighting the urgency of diplomatic engagement. Foreign actors have often entrenched divisions, while peace initiatives led by Western and regional powers are essential but challenged by competing interests. Successful resolution depends on sustained international coordination, pressure on warring factions, adherence to humanitarian principles, and support for Sudanese institutional rebuilding. Without a unified approach, Sudan risks further fragmentation, prolonging human suffering and threatening regional stability in the Red Sea corridor and the Horn of Africa.

14 "Sudan's RSF agrees to US proposal for humanitarian ceasefire," Reuters, 6 November 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudans-rsf-agrees-us-proposal-humanitarian-ceasefire-2025-11-06/ reuters.com

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