

ORION FORUM

# Sudan's Civil War and the Gulf Chessboard

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Similar to other current global crises – such as those in Ukraine, the Middle East and the Democratic Republic of Congo – the conflict in Sudan appears difficult to resolve through negotiations. There are two main factors contributing to this difficulty. First, both parties view the conflict through a zero-sum lens: the victory of one side is entirely dependent on the defeat of the other. Such a logic leaves no room for a win-win solution. Second, the current international context supports the continuation of hostilities by providing the warring parties with multiple partners. This analysis focuses on the second aspect, highlighting global and macro-regional changes and their impact on conflict dynamics. There is often a tendency to exaggerate the role of external actors. Framing the Sudanese conflict as a proxy war may underestimate or overlook the internal variables that are essential to a full understanding of the conflict. Having made this necessary introduction, for which reference should be made to other articles in this ISPI dossier, it is nevertheless essential to understand the role of external actors.

The decline of the liberal international order (LIO) or rules-based order has had repercussions at the state, regional and global levels. These trends are particularly evident in the wider Red Sea region. This area, which encompasses the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, has become increasingly strategic in recent years. A growing number of regional and extra-regional actors have expanded their presence there, driven by specific security and economic interests. All these actors bring their own agenda and priorities, fuelling local and regional rivalries. The interaction between international state and non-state actors further complicates an already volatile situation. The armed conflict in Sudan illustrates this dynamic, as ongoing global changes and the shifting balance of power provide both the

SAF and RSF with various opportunities for external support.

### **The Gulf factor**

Several external actors are involved in the conflict, including Russia, Egypt, Chad, Libya and Iran. However, two Gulf monarchies in particular, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), are providing significant support to the warring parties. Between 2014 and 2015, their influence in Sudanese politics increased under President Omar al-Bashir. In the post-Bashir era, this influence has continued to grow, largely due to the direct links established with Al-Burhan and Hemedti during the Yemen war. A number of factors – regional, global and domestic – have increased Sudan’s strategic importance and prompted the Gulf monarchies to become increasingly active towards the African country. From a geostrategic perspective, the Gulf states see Sudan as a key country because of its geographical location and political weight. The country is situated between two major regions (the Sahel and the Red Sea) characterised by instability and conflict. These regions, stretching from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, face interconnected challenges, including political instability, poverty, food insecurity, the effects of climate change, internal and external wars, population displacement, transnational crime and the emergence of jihadist and armed groups. Moreover, Sudan is an important link not only horizontally between the Sahel and the Red Sea, but also vertically between the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa. In addition to the shifts in regional balances post-2011, the global economic crisis of 2008 was a key factor in increasing interest in the Horn of Africa. The fallout of this crisis in the Gulf countries affected food prices and led to the development of a number of food self-sufficiency plans. Since then, the Gulf monarchies have invested heavily in the agri-food sector, fuelling a phenomenon of land-grabbing. Sudan, with its abundant water resources, offers a large amount of fertile land, making it increasingly attractive to Gulf companies. This underscores Sudan’s importance as a critical crossroads influencing current and future geostrategic dynamics in the region.

Political relations between Saudi Arabia and Sudan date back to Sudan’s independence in 1956. Although such political relations have fluctuated over the years, people-to-people ties have flourished. This strong bond is largely due to the country’s geographical proximity, especially to Mecca and Medina. The case of the UAE is different. Since the beginning of the

new millennium, Abu Dhabi has gradually expanded its sphere of influence. However, it was not until the end of the 2010s that Sudan in particular came to the fore for the Emirates. A similar situation arose with Qatar, which, however, relied on closer ideological ties to local political Islamism.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia gradually increased their presence in Sudan after the 2011 Arab uprisings. Key events such as the US pivot to Asia and the Arab Spring protests have increased uncertainty among Gulf states, leading to a realignment of regional power dynamics and the formation of rival blocs. As a result, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have sought closer ties with African countries, particularly Sudan. The relationship has developed through both military and political engagement, particularly in the context of the Yemen crisis. Sudan sent almost [40,000 soldiers](#) to the Saudi-led Arab coalition against the Houthi rebels. The majority of Sudanese troops deployed in Yemen were former Darfur veterans and members of the RSF. In the early years after the Arab uprisings, UAE influence grew rapidly, driven by concerns about the spread of protest and the need to strengthen security ties with Sudan. This was particularly important given Sudan's proximity to Egypt and the regime's links to the Muslim Brotherhood. Conversely, Saudi Arabia maintained a more stable level of influence from 2010 to 2020, with less pronounced growth in authority compared to the UAE. Although Riyadh also initially feared the spread of protest, its decisions were primarily influenced by its rivalry with Iran. Both Gulf states were wary of al-Bashir's growing ties with Turkey and Qatar, which they feared would strengthen a pro-Islamist bloc in the region. However, after his overthrow in 2019, their approaches gradually began to diverge. Once again, the different regional balances proved decisive. Competition between the two Gulf monarchies has intensified since 2020. First Yemen and then Sudan have become two fragile contexts in which to exert influence over the Red Sea region. Seeing the post-2019 transition as an opportunity, the two monarchies chose to support different factions within Sudan's security and power apparatus. This external support exacerbated internal competition, particularly between the RSF and the SAF. Riyadh, in conjunction with Egypt, maintained close ties with al-Burhan, while Abu Dhabi aligned itself with Hemedti. The situation deteriorated rapidly between 2022 and 2023, leading to the outbreak of war.

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## Abu Dhabi and Riyadh: comparing approaches

The war in Sudan therefore erupted as a result of internal power struggles and various underlying causes. However, the involvement of the Gulf monarchies in supporting the two factions has contributed to the escalation of the conflict. The involvement of the two competitors through indirect support – logistical, military, financial and political – highlights the different approaches of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Saudi Arabia is pursuing a traditional strategy of coalition building. Riyadh has helped to forge alliances among regional actors in support of the SAF. Key participants include Egypt, which sees Sudanese instability as a matter of national security, and Eritrea, which sees the Sudanese civil war as part of its broader struggle against Ethiopia. Over time, various actors have joined this coalition in support of General al-Burhan, including Djibouti, Qatar and, to some extent, Iran. With the primary aim of reshaping the Red Sea region in its own socio-political interests, Riyadh initially provided a financial umbrella under which other actors could play an assertive role. More recently, following the failure of the Jeddah negotiations, Riyadh has also begun to take direct action. As evidence of this approach, Saudi Arabia has begun to take diplomatic steps [to delegitimise](#) the RSF's attempt to form a government parallel to al-Burhan's.

On the contrary, the Emirates have developed a complex and diverse network of connections and interdependencies, mainly through informal channels where politics and business are intertwined. These rarely operate through official structures, preferring instead direct and personal relationships between key figures in Emirati power, particularly the Bani Fatima brothers and leaders of both state and non-state groups in the region. These relationships often involve asymmetrical dependencies, with the Emirates acting as intermediaries between prominent Sudanese actors and other countries. The UAE uses such a network to supply the RSF with ammunition by cargo and private flights. These usually depart from the Emirates and land in Chad or Libya to supply RSF with weapons, medical and food aid. The relationship with Hemedti also has an economic dimension. The financial empire of Hemedti's family is based in Dubai, where his brother, Algoni Dagalo, has ties to the UAE's vice president, Mansour bin Zayed. Dubai is also where Darfur's gold enters the international market.

To understand the UAE's role in the Sudanese civil war, therefore, it is necessary to consider the network of Emirati connections in Libya, the Central African Republic, Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Russia that facilitate a vast trade in arms, gold, and fighters. The UAE occupies a leading position in this network of relationships, not as a leading actor, but rather a necessary mediator between the many stakeholders. In other words, if on the one hand it is an indispensable actor in feeding the networks of connections, on the other hand it does not have total control over them or the actors that compose them. One interesting aspect is the flexibility of the Emirati strategy, which in some contexts strengthens relations with government actors (Ethiopia) and in others with representatives and factions opposed to the government (Sudan, Libya, Somalia). The Emirati elite has created a network of strongmen whose reliance on armed force has been instrumental in destabilising central governments and undermining state sovereignty across the region. For this reason, the UAE appears to be a highly destabilising actor in the region.

Examining the growing influence of the Emirates and Saudi Arabia in Sudanese politics is essential to understanding the causes of the ongoing war and the geopolitical dynamics that have led to the two nations' increasing involvement in Sudan and the wider Red Sea region. Imagining a peaceful solution to the conflict in Sudan is complicated. The situation in Sudan could become very similar to that in neighbouring Libya. There are effectively two centres of power and governance within the country, and this division is likely to become more pronounced in the coming months as the SAF takes control of Khartoum and the RSF strategically withdraws into the Darfur provinces.

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*Image credit: VOA.*

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