

AFRICA

The War in Sudan: As Ceasefires Collapse, the Risks of a Prolonged and Multi-Layered Conflict Rise

JUNE 26, 2023

On May 21, Sudan's warring parties – the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) led by [General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan](#) and the [Rapid Support Forces \(RSF\)](#) led by [General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo \(Hemedti\)](#) – reached a week-long ceasefire. The [agreement](#) was mediated by Saudi Arabia, a country that has a strong interest in Sudan's stability considering the [many projects](#) that Riyadh has been planning along the Saudi Red Sea coast. Throughout the mediation process that led to the agreement, support was also provided by the United States.

However, [the agreement expired](#) as early as June 3 – an outcome that was largely unsurprising given the [pattern of ceasefire violations](#) that has characterized the Sudanese conflict since its earliest days. In fact, while in Jeddah (the Saudi city where the agreement was signed) the two parties' representatives were sitting at the negotiating table, in Khartoum (the Sudanese capital that has been the epicenter of the conflict) fighters [were clearly preparing](#) for new rounds of confrontation. [Further ceasefires](#) that were attempted throughout June were also breached shortly after entering into force.

The main reason for this observed reticence to uphold ceasefires is that each side is confident that it can gain decisive military victories on the ground, which will allow it to enter future talks in a position of strength from where to dictate terms and conditions to the adversary. As is well documented, ceasefire agreements are most likely to be reached, and respected, when warring parties find themselves in a situation of [mutually hurting stalemate](#) – a situation that both the SAF and the RSF believe they have not reached yet.

Origins of the Conflict: How Sudan Fell Prey to Internal Violence

To understand the conflict's origins, we shall go back to the early 2000s in Sudan's Western region of Darfur. In 2003, Hemedti, at that time one of many Darfur-based warlords, was put in charge by then President Omar al-Bashir of one of the largest [Janjaweed militias](#). The latter were Arab militias deployed to repress the local revolt launched by the [Sudan Liberation Movement/Army \(SLM/A\)](#) and the [Justice and Equality Movement \(JEM\)](#). Like Hemedti's, Burhan's career also goes back to the time of the war in Darfur, where he participated as an army officer in the campaign against the rebels.

In 2013, Bashir placed various Janjaweed militias together under Hemedti and renamed them the RSF. The aim was to bring the Janjaweed under greater control and use them to deter an army takeover. Developments, however, did not go as per Bashir's plan and in April 2019 [an uprising overthrew the long-time President](#). While Hemedti and Burhan, who was serving as Commander in Chief of the SAF, initially committed to sharing power with civilians, in October 2021 Hemedti gave his support to Burhan as the latter [staged a military coup](#) against the transitional military-civilian government.

Following the coup, Burhan governed the country and Hemedti served as his deputy. However, tensions between them did not take long to surface. Specifically, disagreement escalated over the [timing for integrating the RSF within the SAF](#) – a step that Hemedti, whose power depends on the RSF, was determined to avoid, while Burhan, who sees the RSF as a threat to his supremacy, was keen to accelerate. As neither leader was willing to relinquish power to the other's advantage, they resorted to arms to settle the dispute.

The Conflict's Expansion: From the Streets of Khartoum to the Plains of Darfur

The conflict between al-Burhan and Hemedti started on April 15 in Khartoum. However, it has since extended beyond the capital. Darfur, in particular, has become Sudan's second place in terms of fierce fighting, with [the city of el-Geneina](#) experiencing a weeks-long communication outage and repeated brutal attacks by militias tied to the RSF.

A series of factors overlap to explain how and why Darfur has turned into a battleground in the current conflict. As mentioned above, Darfur is the homeland of the Janjaweed/RSF. As such, it is the region where Hemedti's men have their stronghold and is the place to where they can

turn to procure supplies, weapons, and fighters. When fighting in Khartoum depletes the RSF's resources, Darfur is the natural place for the group to reorganize, re-strategize, and replenish its assets.

At the same time, the SAF has also managed to cultivate support among some local leaders that Burhan is aiming to unite in a [Darfur-based anti-Hemedti coalition](#). Key figures in this strategy are [Musa Hilal, a former Janjaweed militia leader](#), [Mini Minnawi, a former rebel leader turned governor of Darfur](#), and [Jibril Ibrahim, leader of JEM](#). Building on these men's support, al-Burhan is seeking to expel Hemedti from Khartoum (which for the SAF remains the single most important target considering its importance in sustaining al-Burhan's claim to sovereignty), force the RSF to retreat to Darfur and concentrate most of the fighting in that region.

Beyond Sudan's Borders: The Conflict's Humanitarian Impact on the Region

Besides expanding from Khartoum to Darfur, the Sudanese conflict is having an impact beyond the country's borders as well. Since the onset of the fighting, Hemedti's men have become notorious for [sheltering among civilians](#), [commandeering houses](#), and [looting essential supplies](#), including food and medicines. For its part, the SAF has been [using explosive weapons](#) in densely populated parts of Khartoum, prioritizing military objectives over civilians' protection.

In this situation of brutal fighting, [at least 2.5 million people have been displaced](#). Among those, [520,000 people have left Sudan](#) and sought refuge mostly in Egypt, Chad, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic (CAR). [These countries, however, are badly equipped](#) to sustain the sudden inflow of refugees fleeing violence, both because of general economic difficulties and because of the prior presence of high numbers of refugees from other countries. As a confirmation of this, on Saturday June 10 [Egypt announced a new policy](#) whereby Sudanese citizens need to obtain visas before crossing the border. To make things worse, the [imminent rainy seasons](#) is threatening the prospects for those Sudanese who fled their country and are now living in refugee camps across the borders.

In this overall situation, the risk that the humanitarian crisis might spiral out of control and facilitate instability among Sudan's neighbours is very much high.

Prospects Ahead

As attempts to reach a ceasefire repeatedly fail, fears grow that external parties will opt to intervene in the Sudanese conflict in order to better secure their own interests and advance their own agenda. Sudan, in fact, is a highly strategic country with direct access to the Red Sea and shared borders with Egypt, Libya, Chad, CAR, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. It is, therefore, unsurprising that [regional countries have a strong interest in Sudan](#).

Both the army and the RSF have been accusing each other of getting external support. The RSF is reportedly receiving support from Eastern [Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar](#), the Russian para-military organization Wagner, and the CAR. [The United Arab Emirates seems also](#) to be increasingly in favour of an RSF victory. For its part, the SAF [enjoys support from Egypt](#), which is determined to keep Sudan as a stable and peaceful neighbour, and from Chad, where President Mahamat Idriss Deby [fears that the RSF might extend](#) its influence across the border and lend support to Chadian anti-government factions.

Unless the SAF and the RSF reach a stable ceasefire capable of paving the way to broader peace negotiations, it is very much likely that regional actors will decide to upgrade their support to the warring parties and become more involved in the confrontation. In other words, unless the RSF and the SAF show the willingness to take some serious steps towards de-escalation, regional powers are likely to conclude that investing diplomatic efforts in attempting to reconcile the two warring parties is less beneficial and determinative than investing material resources in the victory of one of the two sides. Under these circumstances, Sudan seems destined to become a new theatre for regional confrontation. With greater involvement of regional countries, the conflict will become more complex, more violent, and more prolonged.

Besides regional actors, there is also widespread concern towards the involvement of foreign powers. Here, most concerns are directed at Russia (and the Russia-linked Wagner Group). Over the past years, in fact, Russia has considerably [increased its involvement](#) in the Middle East and Africa in order to [better secure its economic, political, and strategic interests](#). This was most evident in Moscow's involvement in the conflicts in [Syria](#) (where it supported Assad

as a way to secure its strategic Mediterranean port of Tartus) and [Libya](#) (where it supports military commander Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army). In Sudan, Russia has been attempting to [gain a naval base](#) on the Red Sea and has been involved in the [exploitation of Sudan's gold mines](#). Considering its interests in Sudan, Russia was determined to prevent a democratic transition in the country as much as it was against the option of a confrontation between the country's military leaders. However, now that the conflict has erupted, Russia wants one party to reach a definitive victory, so as to return to a situation of stability (and authoritarianism) favourable to Moscow's projects.

However, the risk that the conflict will become increasingly more complex is not only related to the intervention of foreign actors. Unless Hemedti and al-Burhan accept to commit to a durable ceasefire and agree to enter serious peace talks, it is very much likely that more domestic armed groups will also opt to take part in the hostilities. This seems especially likely to occur in Darfur, a region that has been interested in conflict since the early 2000s and that has a significant presence of former rebel groups, warlords, and armed militias. This became evident in late May when [Mini Minnawi called on people in Darfur to take up arms](#). With greater participation from domestic actors, the conflict will become more fragmented, more unpredictable, and more difficult to resolve.

To avoid a situation in which Sudan becomes the theatre of a multi-layered war fought by a wide array of foreign powers and domestic factions, concerted diplomatic efforts are much needed. Saudi Arabia, having credibility with both the RSF and the SAF, should continue to use its leverage to convene the parties in Jeddah, encourage them to sit at the negotiating table, and help them find a way towards a durable ceasefire capable of leading to a sustained peace dialogue. The United States, which shares the same benefit of having access to both the SAF and the RSF, should also continue to participate actively in the diplomatic efforts, coordinating with Riyadh. It should use its leverage to exert pressure on the warring sides and guide them towards some sort of compromise. The approaching Eid al-Adha holiday, for instance, could be usefully turned into an opportunity for a renewed negotiation effort and a stable ceasefire.

Besides coordinating their own efforts, Saudi Arabia and the US should also coordinate with the African Union (AU) and with IGAD (the Horn of Africa's regional bloc) to ensure that all regional

powers (and especially those with a direct interest in Sudan such as Egypt, CAR, Chad, and Ethiopia) invest their efforts in supporting a ceasefire initiative rather than in supporting the military victory of one of the two parties. Recently, the AU and IGAD have expressed their interest in initiating their own negotiation tracks. Without coordination with the existing Saudi-American track, however, this would ultimately risk complicating and fragmenting peace efforts. Additionally, Saudi Arabia and the US should also include the UAE in their diplomatic efforts. In fact, considering the Emiratis' close ties to the RSF, excluding Abu Dhabi from the negotiation table risks having a high cost in the longer term.

These efforts need to be deployed now when the conflict is still a relatively simple and binary confrontation between two armed actors. If the conflict is allowed to continue and morph into a multi-party confrontation, prospects for peace will become increasingly out of reach.

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