

AFRICA

Sudan: A Conflict Far from a Resolution

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While the world's attention has been focused on the Hamas-Israeli war for the past month, concerning developments have been taking place in Sudan. The confrontation that started on April 15 between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo is rapidly [degenerating into a full-scale civil war](#) - a war that is "verging on pure evil", according to a senior United Nations official.

Significantly, Burhan and Hemedti have not always been rivals. In fact, there was a time, not too long ago, in which the two leaders were united by common interests. In October 2021, Hemedti supported Burhan as the latter [staged a military coup](#) against the transitional military-civilian government that came to power following Omar al-Bashir's overthrow. However, tensions soon emerged between Hemedti and Burhan, most prominently over the [timing for integrating the RSF within the SAF](#). As neither leader was ready to give in to the other's demands, they resorted to arms instead.

The military and political situation on the ground

Since the first months, most of the fighting has taken place in Khartoum State and Darfur State. As the seat of the national capital, Khartoum State is seen by the RSF as a highly appealing target to consolidate its political and military position vis-à-vis its rival, while it is seen by the SAF as key to maintaining credibility at the national, regional, and international levels.

Darfur, for its part, is a traditional stronghold of the RSF and a location known worldwide for the [genocidal conflict](#) that took place there in the early 2000s. At the time of that conflict, Arab

militias known as the Janjaweed (from which Hemedti's RSF originated) targeted members of non-Arab African communities in the region, such as the Fur, the Masalit, and the Zaghawa.

More recently, however, the conflict has also expanded towards other Sudanese States: Jazira State, where hundreds of thousands relocated after fleeing from Khartoum; South Kordofan State, where the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) armed group [has been joining the fight](#) and attacking army barracks; and White Nile State, where there is a large population of South Sudanese refugees.

After seven months of war, most of Khartoum is now in the hands of the RSF, [which controls](#) large swathes within the tri-city area of Khartoum, Bahri, and Omdurman. More towards the south, the RSF asserted its control on both sides of the Blue Nile River, particularly the localities of [al-Kamlin and Sharg al-Jazira](#) in al-Jazira state. Having lost much control on the ground, the SAF has been left to targeting RSF positions through heavy artillery and air power, which threatens to have an [enormous human cost](#).

On the background of these developments in terms of territorial control, political tensions between RSF and SAF have also heightened. Following insinuations by the Sudan's Sovereign Council, headed by al-Burhan, that a caretaker government might be set up in Port Sudan (where al-Burhan has established his base), [Hemedti responded in kind that](#) "if the army forms the government, we will immediately initiate broad consultations to establish a genuine civilian authority in areas under our extensive control with Khartoum as the capital. We will not tolerate the creation of an alternative seat of power."

Besides Khartoum, dramatic developments have also taken place across Darfur. In late October the RSF [seized Nyala](#), Sudan's second-largest city and capital of South Darfur State. The fighting for Nyala that culminated into the RSF's [conquest of the 16th Infantry Division](#) reportedly [drew in Arab militias](#) allied with the RSF that mostly pursued their own independent agenda.

Also, in the southern portion of South Darfur State, clashes involving ethnic militias associated with the RSF were reported. The participation of armed militias that had previously remained out of the conflict is raising fears that the conflict could spiral soon into a multidimensional civil war fought across ethnic and tribal lines. Furthermore, the clashes between [the Salamat and](#)

[the Beni Halba militias](#) that had begun last May [have continued to intensify](#) in the State.

In Central Darfur, the RSF [captured Zalingei city](#), the State's capital on October 31 upon capturing the 21st Infantry Division headquarters in the city. In West Darfur's capital of el-Geneina, the RSF has also been [consolidating its control](#), capturing the 15th Division headquarters, which means the RSF is getting dangerously close to establishing its control over the entire Darfur region.

Meanwhile, as ceasefire attempts have been failing and the conflict continues to escalate and draw in more and more armed groups, ethnic militias, and tribal factions, regional countries have been providing support to the main warring sides. Egypt, in particular, [has been sending](#) military equipment to the SAF, while the [UAE has been backing the RSF](#) through Chad.

A crisis unfolding away from the media attention

Since the war's onset last April, a humanitarian crisis of tragic proportions – defined as a “[humanitarian nightmare](#)” by the UN – has been unfolding in the country, condemning Sudan's civilian population to extreme suffering. As of the time of this writing, [10,400 people](#) have been killed, and 4.6 million have been internally displaced, seeking refuge in [4,728 locations](#) across all of Sudan's states. Besides, [1.17 million](#) civilians have fled Sudan due to the conflict and have become refugees in [neighboring countries](#). Moreover, as of November 2023, [24.7 million Sudanese people](#) – especially in Khartoum, Darfur, and Kordofan – lack access to food, water, electricity, and healthcare and depend on humanitarian aid for their survival.

The RSF's recent territorial conquests throughout Darfur have been raising concerns that the humanitarian situation, the indiscriminate violence, and the human rights abuses observed in the Sudan conflict might worsen further. According to the [UN Human Rights Office \(OHCHR\)](#), women and girls are being abducted and held in slave-like conditions in areas controlled by the RSF in Darfur, where they are allegedly forcibly married and held for ransom. In el-Geneina, people fleeing Sudan to Chad [have reported](#) new episodes of [ethnically motivated killings](#) by the RSF and allied Arab militias. These have systematically targeted the Masalit, a non-Arab African tribe inhabiting West Sudan, killing men, women, and children. In Central Darfur, the RSF has been [shelling](#) the Hassa Hissa IDP camp, where most of the residents are of the Fur ethnicity.

This, however, has not attracted significant attention at the international level. The scarce interest in Sudan's humanitarian crisis is comparable to that for Yemen – another country overlooking the Red Sea that has been the theatre of the [world's worst humanitarian crisis](#) for the past eight years and yet has attracted only minimal attention internationally (beyond a restricted group of Yemeni and foreign experts who have done their best to keep attention for the country alive). The little attention devoted to Sudan's war – and its human rights violations and humanitarian crisis – is even more striking if one compares it with the immense attention that – certainly for legitimate reasons – has been given to Gaza since October.

Efforts for peace

Despite the many dramatic developments described above, in late October the warring parties [restarted peace talks](#) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The talks in Jeddah are focused on a narrow set of objectives – facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance, establish ceasefires and other confidence-building measures, and build toward a permanent cessation of hostilities.

Besides the US and Saudi Arabia, representatives of the Horn of Africa's IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) also joined the peace talks on behalf of the African Union (AU). On November 7 [it was announced that](#) the SAF and the RSF have committed to facilitate increased humanitarian assistance and implement a series of confidence-building measures, thus reaffirming their obligations under the May 11, 2023, Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan. However, no progress was made on agreeing on a ceasefire, and the prospects for peace appear as grim as before.

To be fair, the lack of significant progress between the RSF and the SAF hardly came as a surprise. Considering that the conflict has progressively extended to new states within Sudan and has drawn in more militias and armed groups, a bilateral negotiation process is no longer reflecting the military reality on the ground. In this context, should an agreement even be reached by the SAF and the RSF, many doubts remain on the extent to which that would affect other groups and militias, which might rather, prefer to continue fighting to better secure their interests.

Also, as regional countries such as Egypt and the UAE continue to throw their support behind the SAF and the RSF, respectively, the warring parties' incentive to take the peace talks

seriously is pretty low. This was well demonstrated by the RSF's relentless military attacks in late October in Darfur, which took place even as the talks in Jeddah were starting. As Hemedti obtains more and more victories in Khartoum and Darfur, he will likely prefer to continue the fighting so as to rejoin the talks in the future in a position of decisive strength vis-à-vis his rival.

Finally, the question of the [civilian representatives](#) (political parties, neighborhood resistance committees, traditional civil society organizations), who have thus far been excluded from the peace talks, remains open. While some mediators, such as the AU, [have expressed their support](#) for the inclusion of civilians and have indicated the latter's participation as a key condition for peace in Sudan, no concrete action in this direction has been taken yet. [As accurately noted by Amgad Fareid Eltayeb](#), who served as Chief of Staff to former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, "without civilian leadership in negotiations, talks can only generate another power-sharing deal or short-term understanding that was behind the causation of this war in the first place."

Under the current circumstances, the conflict in Sudan does not seem set to end anytime soon. Rather, the participation of more armed actors initially inactive, the expansion of the fighting to new states, the human rights violations observed in Darfur, and the little seriousness with which the main warring parties have approached the Jeddah talks suggest that the conflict is on its way to becoming more complex, more widespread, more prolonged, and more brutal.

The view from Washington

During the rule of Bashir, Sudan and the US had turbulent relations, dominated by the Sudanese leader's hospitality towards Osama bin Laden (and other prominent figures from the jihadist scene) and Washington's imposition of severe sanctions. The fall of al-Bashir in 2019 paved the way to an improvement in ties between Washington and Khartoum. This improvement was confirmed in 2020, when [Sudan and the US re-established diplomatic ties](#) and a US ambassador was appointed to Sudan for the first time after 25 years. In October 2020, moreover, Sudan agreed to normalize relations with Israel in exchange for the US [removing it from its list of "state sponsors of terrorism"](#).

As the war broke out in Sudan last April, the US formulated its goals in the following terms: arriving at a ceasefire, making the ceasefire permanent, and returning the country to a civilian government. Driven by these goals, the US [has imposed sanctions on some individuals and businesses](#) accused of subverting democratic transition and fueling the conflict and has taken upon itself the role of main mediator in SAF-RSF talks, alongside Saudi Arabia. However, the US-Saudi-led diplomacy could only bring about some short-lived ceasefires and the Biden administration [has been accused of failing](#) to act in a prompt, resolute, and adequate manner – something which is believed to have encouraged other actors to intervene and attempt to gain from the conflict.

Moreover, since October 7 the attention of the US has been widely concentrated on the Middle Eastern arena. There, not only has the [conflict between Hamas and Israel](#) reached an unprecedented level of intensity, but US targets in Syria and Iraq have also been [attacked by Iran-allied armed groups](#), which has forced the US to launch [retaliatory strikes](#) against Iranian facilities. Most recently, the [Houthis' hijacking of a commercial ship](#) passing through the Red Sea only contributed to raising concerns in Washington (and beyond) that the conflict might be about to escalate into a wider confrontation. Preoccupied by these security and political concerns, it was easy for the United States to sideline Sudan further.

At this stage, the US should continue to improve coordination with IGAD and the AU and should ensure that Egypt and the UAE, which have significant leverage on the SAF and RSF and can exercise pressure on them, give their full support to a ceasefire initiative. While the Jeddah talks have suffered some a series of limitations over the past months, they are still the most credible platform where to engage in negotiations. If IGAD's participation in the latest round of Jeddah talks was an encouraging development, the next step must be the inclusion of Egypt and the UAE as well. As it engages with Cairo and Abu Dhabi, Washington should also invest its best diplomatic efforts to deter other regional countries from intervening in the conflict.

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