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# War in Sudan

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*Prepared as a neutral reference text for conference participants*

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## **Purpose of the note**

This background note provides a concise but systematic overview of the current war in Sudan. It is intended as a factual reference for academic presentations and conference discussions. The aim is not to offer a political interpretation or to assign a simplified moral narrative, but to establish a shared analytical context: when the war began, who the principal parties are, why the conflict escalated, which regions have been most affected, and what sources can be used for further orientation.

The war in Sudan is often mentioned in relation to displacement, famine, sexual violence, public health collapse, destruction of infrastructure, and mass civilian suffering. However, without a basic understanding of the structure of the conflict, such references may remain vague. The current war is not a conventional interstate war. It is an internal armed conflict between rival military institutions that had previously shared power within the Sudanese state.

## **When the war began**

The current war began on 15 April 2023, when fighting broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces in Khartoum. The initial battles focused on strategic sites such as military headquarters, airports, bridges, media infrastructure, and government facilities. The fighting rapidly spread from the capital to other regions of Sudan, including Darfur, Kordofan, Gezira, Sennar, and other areas.

Although the war began in April 2023, its causes are rooted in earlier political and military developments. The fall of Omar al-Bashir in 2019 opened a transitional period in which civilian and military forces attempted to share power. This transition remained unstable. In October 2021, the military interrupted the transition through a coup. After that, the two main armed actors — the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces — remained formally aligned for a time, but their rivalry intensified.

The immediate trigger of the war was the failure to agree on the future of the Rapid Support Forces and their integration into the regular army. The dispute concerned not only a technical military reform, but the question of who would command armed force in Sudan and how state authority would be organized.

## **Main actors**

The two principal parties to the war are the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces.

The Sudanese Armed Forces, usually abbreviated as SAF, are Sudan's regular national army. They are led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who became the leading military figure in Sudan after the fall of Omar al-Bashir and the later interruption of the civilian transition. The SAF present themselves as the formal army of the state and as the institution defending the state against a paramilitary challenge. They possess air power, heavy weapons, a formal military hierarchy, and links to state institutions.

The Rapid Support Forces, usually abbreviated as RSF, are a powerful paramilitary force led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, widely known as Hemedti. The RSF grew out of militia structures associated with the earlier Darfur conflict and were later formalized as a major paramilitary institution. Before the current war, the RSF had acquired significant military capacity, economic interests, recruitment networks, and territorial influence. It operated with a high degree of autonomy.

The conflict has also drawn in additional actors: local militias, former rebel movements, tribal armed groups, community defense forces, and regional allies. In some regions the war is primarily a direct confrontation between SAF and RSF. In others it overlaps with older conflicts over land, identity, local authority, access to resources, and the legacy of the Darfur war.

### **The central problem**

The core problem behind the war is the coexistence of two armed institutions claiming decisive authority within the same state. The proposed transition to civilian rule required security sector reform and the creation of a unified chain of command. This meant that the RSF would eventually have to be integrated into the regular army. The SAF considered such integration necessary for preserving the unity of the state's armed forces. The RSF, however, saw rapid integration as a threat to its autonomy, leadership, financial networks, and political influence.

The conflict therefore cannot be reduced to a personal rivalry between two commanders. It reflects a deeper crisis of sovereignty and state formation. The central questions are: who commands armed force, who controls territory, who has access to economic resources, who represents the state, and whether a civilian political order can be built when armed institutions retain autonomous power.

In this sense, the war in Sudan is a conflict over the structure of the state itself. It is a war over command, legitimacy, resources, territory, and the future political order.

### **Geographic development of the war**

The war began in Khartoum, but it quickly became national in scope. The capital and its surrounding urban area — Khartoum, Omdurman, and Bahri — were devastated by street fighting, shelling, airstrikes, looting, and the collapse of public services. Urban warfare trapped civilians in residential areas and destroyed administrative, medical, educational, and economic infrastructure.

Darfur became one of the most severely affected regions. This is especially important because Darfur had already experienced mass violence in the early 2000s. In the current war, reports from West Darfur, North Darfur, and other areas have described ethnic targeting, mass killings, sexual violence, destruction of settlements, attacks on displacement camps, and siege conditions. El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, became a major focus of fighting and humanitarian concern.

Kordofan has also been heavily affected, including areas of North and South Kordofan. Gezira, one of Sudan's most important agricultural regions, became a crucial area because violence there disrupted food production, markets, and transport networks. The spread of war into agricultural and trade regions has deepened the food crisis.

The military geography of the war has changed over time. Control of areas has shifted, and the front lines have not remained stable. The SAF regained important positions in parts of the capital region, while the RSF consolidated control or influence in large parts of Darfur and other western areas. The result is a fragmented geography of war rather than a single clear front line.

### **Regions and populations most affected**

The areas most affected by the war include:

Khartoum and the capital region, because of the initial urban fighting, destruction of infrastructure, displacement, looting, and collapse of state services.

Darfur, because of mass displacement, ethnic violence, attacks on civilians, siege conditions, destruction of villages and camps, and the continuation of older patterns of violence from the previous Darfur conflict.

El Fasher and surrounding areas in North Darfur, because of prolonged siege conditions, attacks on displacement camps, mass civilian suffering, and acute food insecurity.

Kordofan, because of military expansion, attacks on civilian areas, displacement, and disruption of local livelihoods.

Gezira and other agricultural regions, because the war has affected food production, trade routes, markets, and access to basic goods.

Border regions and neighbouring countries, especially Chad, South Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, and the Central African Republic, because millions of people have fled across borders or returned under extremely difficult conditions.

The war has affected civilians not only through direct violence but also through hunger, disease, loss of shelter, collapse of income, lack of medical care, destruction of water systems, and interruption of education.

### **Humanitarian consequences**

Sudan is now one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. Millions of people have been displaced inside the country, while millions more have fled to neighbouring states. Many families have been displaced multiple times as areas that initially seemed safe later became insecure.

The destruction of health services is one of the defining consequences of the war. Hospitals and clinics have been damaged, looted, occupied, or forced to close. Health workers have been killed, detained, or displaced. Vaccination systems and disease surveillance have been disrupted. These conditions have contributed to outbreaks of disease and have made basic treatment inaccessible for large parts of the population.

Food insecurity is another central dimension of the crisis. The war has disrupted agriculture, markets, transport, humanitarian access, household income, and food distribution. In some

areas, famine or famine-like conditions have been reported. The problem is not only the availability of food, but also access: civilians may be unable to reach markets, unable to afford food, or unable to receive humanitarian assistance because of insecurity and obstruction.

The humanitarian crisis is therefore not a secondary consequence of the war. It is part of the way the war is experienced by civilians. Hunger, disease, displacement, and the collapse of services are central forms of harm.

### **Violence against civilians**

Civilians have been directly and indirectly targeted throughout the conflict. Reports by international organizations and human rights monitors describe killings, sexual violence, arbitrary detention, looting, forced displacement, attacks on medical facilities, and ethnically targeted violence. Both principal parties and allied forces have been accused of serious violations of international humanitarian law, although patterns of violence differ by region and actor.

Darfur is of particular concern because current violence there echoes earlier patterns of mass violence. Communities identified as non-Arab, including Masalit and other groups, have faced severe attacks in some areas. Human rights organizations and UN bodies have warned of atrocity crimes, possible ethnic cleansing, and genocidal patterns in parts of Darfur.

Sexual violence has been widely reported, especially in areas under attack or occupation. Such violence should not be treated as incidental. In many contemporary wars, sexual violence functions as a method of terror, displacement, domination, and social destruction.

### **Regional and international dimensions**

Although the war is internal, it has important regional and international dimensions. Sudan is strategically located between the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, North Africa, and Central Africa. Its instability affects migration routes, refugee flows, trade, regional security, food systems, and political relations among neighbouring states.

Neighbouring countries have received large numbers of refugees and returnees. Chad and South Sudan have been particularly affected by cross-border displacement. Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, and the Central African Republic have also been affected in different ways.

External actors have been accused of supporting one side or the other through political backing, logistics, weapons, or financial channels. These allegations are contested, but the broader point is clear: the war is embedded in regional competition and cannot be understood only as a domestic conflict. External involvement complicates ceasefire negotiations and reduces the pressure for compromise.

### **Why peace efforts have failed**

Several diplomatic initiatives have attempted to establish ceasefires, humanitarian access, or negotiations. These efforts have repeatedly failed or remained limited. There are several reasons.

First, both sides have at different moments believed that military victory was possible. Second, neither side trusts the other to observe a ceasefire. Third, the conflict includes allied militias and local armed actors that may not be fully controlled by central commanders. Fourth, external support and regional rivalries weaken diplomatic pressure. Fifth, the central issue — the future of the SAF, the RSF, and the security sector — remains unresolved.

A ceasefire alone would not solve the conflict. A durable settlement would require protection of civilians, humanitarian access, accountability for major crimes, security sector reform, and a credible political process that does not simply reproduce armed rule.

### **Why the war matters for academic discussion**

For academic and conference purposes, the war in Sudan is important because it shows how modern armed conflict produces complex forms of destruction beyond the battlefield. It is relevant to the study of:

- forced migration and displacement;
- famine and food systems under war conditions;
- urban warfare and infrastructure collapse;
- sexual violence and civilian protection;
- ethnic violence and atrocity risks;
- public health emergencies during war;
- paramilitary power and state fragmentation;
- humanitarian access and the limits of international response;
- regional destabilization across Africa and the Red Sea area;
- the relationship between resource control and armed authority.

Sudan should therefore not be described only as a “political crisis.” It is a complex armed conflict with military, humanitarian, legal, social, economic, and regional dimensions.

### **Neutral formulation for use in presentations**

The current war in Sudan began on 15 April 2023 as an armed confrontation between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces. The immediate trigger was a dispute over the integration of the RSF into the regular army and over the future command structure of the Sudanese state during a proposed transition to civilian rule. The conflict rapidly expanded from Khartoum to Darfur, Kordofan, Gezira, and other regions. It has produced one of the world’s largest displacement and humanitarian crises, with millions of people displaced, severe food insecurity, destruction of civilian infrastructure, collapse of health services, and extensive reports of violations against civilians. The war is best understood as a struggle between rival armed institutions over state authority, military command, territory, and resources, rather than as a conventional war between two states.

### **Key terms**

- SAF — Sudanese Armed Forces, the regular national army of Sudan.
- RSF — Rapid Support Forces, a powerful paramilitary formation led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti.
- Abdel Fattah al-Burhan — Commander of the SAF and leading figure of Sudan’s military leadership after the fall of Omar al-Bashir.
- Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo / Hemedti — Commander of the RSF.
- Darfur — Western region of Sudan, heavily affected by both the earlier Darfur conflict and the current war.
- El Fasher — Capital of North Darfur and a major site of siege, displacement, food insecurity, and atrocity concerns.
- Khartoum — Capital of Sudan and the initial center of the April 2023 fighting.
- Security sector integration — The disputed process of incorporating the RSF into the regular armed forces; one of the immediate causes of the war.

- IPC Phase 5 / Famine — The most severe classification in the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification system, used only under specific technical conditions.

## **Selected bibliography and sources for further orientation**

### **General background and chronology**

- Reuters. “Why is Sudan at war, and what is the impact?” Reuters, 2026.
- Reuters. “Sudan conflict: what’s behind the war?” Reuters, 2023.
- Council on Foreign Relations. “Civil War in Sudan.” Global Conflict Tracker.
- BBC News, Al Jazeera, Associated Press, The Guardian, Le Monde. Selected reporting on major phases of the war, displacement, Darfur, El Fasher, and humanitarian consequences.

### **Humanitarian situation and displacement**

- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Sudan Emergency.
- International Organization for Migration. Displacement Tracking Matrix: Sudan.
- ReliefWeb. Sudan country page and Sudan regional displacement crisis updates.

### **Food insecurity and famine**

- Integrated Food Security Phase Classification. Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Analysis.
- World Food Programme. Sudan emergency updates.
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Sudan food security and agricultural updates.
- UNICEF. Sudan child protection, malnutrition, and emergency updates.

### **Health system and medical consequences**

- World Health Organization. Sudan health emergency updates.
- Médecins Sans Frontières. Sudan conflict reports and medical situation updates.
- Human rights, international law, and atrocity documentation
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan.
- Human Rights Watch. Sudan country reports and World Report chapters.
- Amnesty International. Sudan conflict reports, including reports on attacks against civilians, displacement camps, and sexual violence.
- International Criminal Court. Darfur-related materials and statements.
- UN Security Council. Reports and resolutions on Sudan and Darfur.

### **Conflict analysis and military dynamics**

- International Crisis Group. Sudan conflict analysis.
- Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. Sudan conflict data, maps, and analysis.
- European Union Agency for Asylum. Sudan security situation reports.
- Rift Valley Institute. Sudan and Horn of Africa analysis.
- Chatham House. Sudan, Red Sea, and regional security analysis.

- Carnegie Endowment and Brookings Institution. Selected analysis on Sudan, regional politics, and armed governance.

### **Maps and data sources**

- ACLED — for conflict events, violence patterns, territorial dynamics, and maps.
- IOM DTM — for internal displacement, return movements, and mobility tracking.
- UNHCR Operational Data Portal — for refugee movements and cross-border displacement.
- OCHA — for humanitarian access, people in need, operational constraints, and affected areas.
- IPC — for food insecurity and famine classification maps.
- WFP and FAO — for food systems, hunger, markets, and agricultural disruption.

### **Minimum recommended reading set**

For a participant with limited time, the following five sources are sufficient for a basic but reliable understanding of the war:

- Reuters explainer on the origins and impact of the war;
- UN OCHA Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan;
- UNHCR Sudan Emergency page;
- IPC Sudan acute food insecurity analysis;
- International Crisis Group analysis of Sudan's war.

*For a participant preparing an academic paper or presentation, the following should be added:*

- OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission materials;
- Human Rights Watch Sudan reports;
- Amnesty International Sudan reports;
- ACLED Sudan conflict data and analysis;
- IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix reports;
- MSF and WHO reports on health system collapse.

### **Concluding summary**

The war in Sudan began in April 2023 because two powerful armed institutions could not agree on the future structure of military authority in the country. The SAF and RSF had cooperated after the fall of Bashir and after the 2021 coup, but their partnership collapsed when the proposed transition required security sector reform and a unified chain of command. The result was a nationwide war that devastated Khartoum, intensified violence in Darfur, spread into agricultural and strategic regions, and generated mass displacement, hunger, disease, and extensive civilian suffering.

The conflict should be understood not only as a power struggle between two commanders, but as a broader crisis of state formation, armed autonomy, resource control, and civilian protection. Its consequences are humanitarian, legal, social, economic, and regional. For conference discussion, the most neutral and analytically useful framing is this: Sudan's war is an internal armed conflict between rival military institutions whose competition over command, sovereignty, territory, and resources has produced state fragmentation and one of the world's most severe civilian crises.