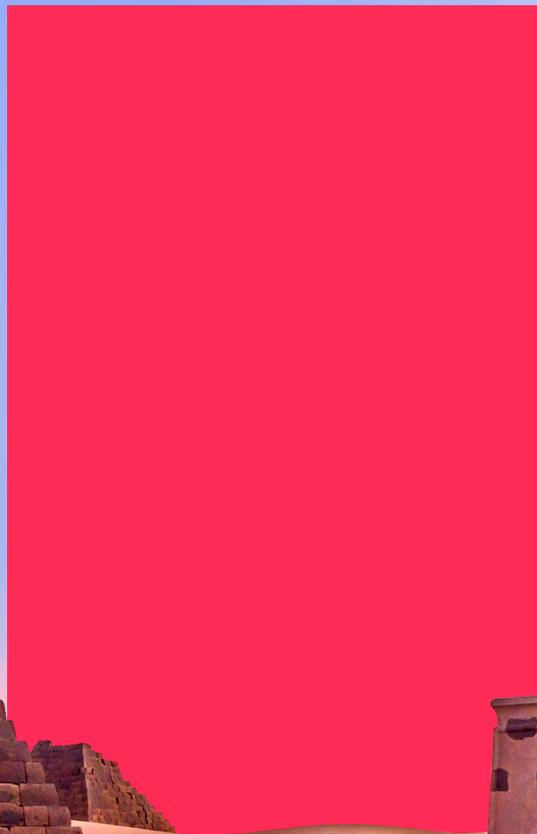


SPOTLIGHT ON SUDAN



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Sudan's Generals' Rivalry and Its Transnational Dimensions

Introduction

Khartoum, Sudan's Capital city, woke up to loud sounds of gunfire on the morning of April 15, 2023. [Following tensions and escalations](#) between Sudan's Armed Forces (SAF) General Abdel-fattah al-Burhan and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) commander General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (commonly known as 'Hemedti'), they decided to blow it into a full-on war. Very quickly, violent clashes extended to other cities in Sudan. Two weeks after fighting between Sudan's Generals erupted, an end to the conflict does not seem imminent. While both Generals continue to claim to have the upper hand and [trade accusations](#) on who is violating attempted ceasefires, the situation remains ambiguous.

The fighting between SAF and RSF is still ongoing, despite [various mediation attempts](#) and failed ceasefires that were not honoured by both parties. As the conflict continues, a grave humanitarian crisis is unfolding across the country. With [at least](#) 459 killed and four thousand injured, the World Health Organisation (WHO) [reported](#) that over 60% of Khartoum's health facilities are not functioning. With foreign nationals getting [evacuated](#) from Sudan, Sudanese people are left to fend for themselves in a deteriorating situation and shortage in food supplies, as well as power and water outages. With various regional and transnational interests at stake, the biggest concern is for these violent clashes to develop into a full-blown civil war that could spread not only in Sudan, but across the entire region.

This brief examines the regional and transitional dimensions of the ongoing conflict, and the alliances siding with each of the rivalling Generals. It will also look into the current state of regional interventions and the prospective consequences of any foreign meddling in the conflict.

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Beyond Sudan: regional dimensions and alliances

It is not a secret that both SAF and RSF have strong [transnational ties](#) and alliances in the MENA region and beyond. Some of these relationships predate Sudan's 2019 democratic transition but have become stronger afterwards after the two Generals became gained senior roles in the traditional government. Given the history of the partnership between SAF and RSF, they also tend to share some of these allies who are now forced to pick sides, play double games, or remain neutral. Yet, many of these alliances remain distinct and intact.

Among neighbouring countries, Egypt has long-standing [ties](#) to SAF and has been [openly](#) supporting General al-Burhan. In addition to the strong military relations between the Egyptian army and the Sudanese army, commanders of both armies have [cooperated](#) on the issues of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project, which makes their alliance quite strategic.

On the other hand, Ethiopia – which stands on the other side of the GERD issue– would automatically [align](#) the country with RSF against SAF. General Dagalo was [reported](#) to have close ties with Addis Ababa since 2021. However, the Ethiopian government has not publicly admitted any direct support to RSF.

In addition, Gulf countries have been [important actors](#) in Sudan, particularly, Saudi and the UAE. They both have relations with SAF and RSF that were deepened by [their provision of troops](#) alongside Emirati forces to the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen. Whilst Saudi's bias between SAF and RSF is less obvious, the United UAE appears to have [stronger ties](#) with RSF.

An extension of the UAE's support to RSF, is the [support](#) of Haftar, the commander of the Libyan National Army, who has [long been backed by the UAE](#). Haftar and RSF [reportedly provided support](#) to each other on several occasions.

Both SAF and RSF have had [close ties](#) with Israel, linked to Israel's [normalization process with Sudan](#) in the last few years. The Israeli government have not indicated clear support for one party over the other. They have also offered to [host](#) Israeli-mediated talks between the rivalling Genet rals, which could indicate that they want to take a neutral stance.

Perhaps the most controversial actor in the Sudanese scene from a global perspective is [Russia](#). Moscow has long [sought](#) ties with both SAF and RSF, mostly to get Sudan to host a Russian naval base. The Russian government did not openly take a side and arguably is playing a double game. Furthermore, the notorious Russian mercenary force Wagner Group has been linked to RSF for various commercial and military operations in Sudan. Although Wagner denied it was operating in Sudan, there have been various [claims](#) that they were involved in illicit gold mining in Sudan. Although Russia's interference in Sudan is undeniable, it can often [get exaggerated](#) due to the global perceptions of Russia.

Other neighbouring countries that tend to have [vested interests](#) in Sudan are Chad and South Sudan. However, despite their proximity they have -relatively- less influence on SAF and RSF and [do not have strong alliances](#) with one over the other.

Transnational interference in Sudan's conflict

Whilst various actors have quickly attempted to call the ongoing conflict in Sudan a 'proxy war', it is vital to appreciate that it is [essentially](#) about the actors on the ground and their various geo-strategic rivalries. The power struggle between the two Generals has its [roots](#) in the years before a 2019 uprising that ousted the regime of Omar al-Bashir, who built up formidable security forces that he deliberately set against one another. Therefore, and despite the regional dimensions of both rivalries, this conflict has numerous interlinked factors and drivers that are all Sudan-specific. Furthermore, there is no strong evidence that any of the SAF and RSF allies have intervened on the ground yet, aside from suspicions that Wagner [sent](#) weapons to RSF. Nevertheless, this conflict [matters greatly](#) beyond Sudan as it brings to the fore a range of complex contestations over resources, security and influence that has bedevilled the region.

Potential consequences of Sudan's ongoing conflict

The continuation of the conflict in Sudan will threaten to evolve it from a relatively straightforward power struggle into a more complex civil war. Without a viable avenue for peace, the SAF and RSF will need supply lines to continue the civil war, increasing the possibility of meddling from external actors, which will [complicate](#) the crisis and make it more difficult for a resolution to be found. The suffering internally will be horrific, but the regional implications will be just as [serious](#). Sudan is in a [volatile](#) region bordering the Red Sea, the Sahel region and the Horn of Africa.

Sudan borders seven countries, five of which have [faced](#) political upheaval or conflict in recent years, and all of which have [security challenges](#) that are intertwined with the politics of Khartoum. Hence, a full-blown war in Sudan will [attract](#) interventions from various actors and will highly likely [spill over](#) and spread and widen humanitarian crises across borders. The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, rightly, [warned](#) at a Security Council meeting that there is a risk of a "catastrophic conflagration" of the conflict that could consume the region and beyond if a solution is not found soon.

To the west of Sudan, Chad is highly likely to get [affected](#) by the continuation and expansion of the conflict in Sudan. The Darfur region in the west could become a [base](#) for rebels who are challenging the government in Chad. Furthermore, weapons and fighters could [flow freely](#) across the war-torn neighbours, the Central African Republic and Libya.

On the Eastern side, the war in Sudan could [affect](#) the Tigray region in Ethiopia, which is still emerging from [a gruelling conflict](#), involving the isolated and highly militarised autocracy neighbour, Eritrea. Moreover, the Sudanese-Ethiopian borders are contested and have been witnessing reoccurring tensions.

To the south, Sudan faces South Sudan, which formally broke away from Sudan in 2011 after one of Africa's longest and bloodiest civil wars. South Sudan [remains](#) conflict-prone and the borders, too, are unstable.

The price of the continuation of the conflict in Sudan is extremely high and, essentially, [not in the interest](#) of any of its neighbours. Expanding the war with the involvement of regional actors and turning it into a proxy war, could [lead](#) to a decades-long crisis in the region. Therefore, it should be the priority of all actors and allies of both camps, to end this war before it spreads. Furthermore, global powers should capitalize on the leverage over the regional allies to pressure SAF and RSF, to end the conflict in Sudan and mitigate the risk of spillover.

In the days ahead, it will be important to [pay attention](#) to any fluid alignments, double games and re-ordering of alliances in the region, as SAF and RSF have historically shared some allies. Moreover, any mediation efforts should [include](#) all transnational allies of the warring side, to address all regional dimensions of the conflict. Although the armed conflict in Sudan could quickly develop into a regional civil war, these transnational linkages could be [used](#) to end the conflict sooner rather than later.

Disclaimer: *The information and views set out in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung or its Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean.*

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