

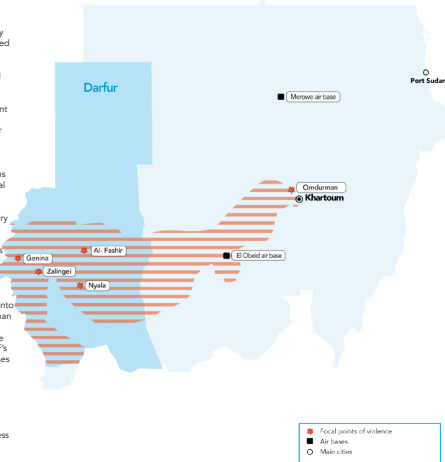
The Sudan Conflict

Diplomatic Efforts

In April 2023, a conflict erupted in Sudan between the two main military factions of the country: the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) led by Lt.-Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by Lt.-Gen. [Mohamed Hamsan Dagalo](#) (a.k.a. Hemedti). The reasons for the recent outbreak and the obstacles to its resolution must be placed within the context of Sudan's ongoing struggle for the establishment of a civilian government since the deposition of longtime ruler Omar al Bashir in 2019.

In December 2018, massive peaceful protests erupted throughout the country against al Bashir's rule, organized and led by Resistance Committees, consisting of youth and women groups that have been working for years on mobilizing the population. The protests led to the fall of the Bashir regime in April 2019 but did not stop as the then-allied SAF and the RSF fought to establish a successor military regime. An ideologically diverse coalition called the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) emerged and engaged in negotiations with the military, leading to establishing a hybrid civilian-military transitional government in which the FFC controlled the executive, and the military had effective control of the civilian-military Sovereignty Council. The hybrid transitional government had the stated goal of eventually establishing a civilian government that would lead Sudan to elections and democratic rule. Military officers were adhering to the transitional plan until October 2021, at which point they overthrew the transitional government. The SAF and the RSF justified this move by arguing that the council was plagued by political infighting and had failed to deliver economic development. Critics of the regime have argued that the coup was a ploy by military generals to perpetuate their power and further consolidate their respective financial and political networks. After the coup, both Burhan and Hemedti became politically isolated. There was little perceived incentive for civilians to enter negotiations with military officials. It was only after the intervention of both international and national actors that a part of the FFC decided to return to the negotiation table. The result of these negotiations was the ratification of the [Political Framework agreement](#) (PFA). The PFA laid out a timeline for the transition to civilian rule. It also precluded the military from taking part in commercial activities and provided for the reintegration of the RSF into the SAF. The process of the agreement however excluded key actors in Sudan, such as the leaders of rebel groups and Islamists and disregarded previous agreements had between civil actors that assured the respect for regional actors in negotiations. Furthermore, it failed to provide the means to enforce this transitional process. In the months that followed, tensions started growing between the RSF and the SAF. This was due to their dwindling popularity and the conditions of the PFA. The SAF tried to [undercut](#) the RSF's power in the hopes that this would allow for its speedy integration into the SAF. Hemedti, for his part, tried to fashion himself as a [reformist](#) alternative to Burhan by accusing the SAF leader of harboring [Bashir-era Islamists](#) in his corps.

This tension [culminated](#) in an all out civil war on April 15, 2023. The belligerents accuse each other of having ignited the war, with the SAF claiming it was provoked by the RSF's Hemedti, the head of the RSF, launched an attack on the country's main military air bases in the city of Meroe. The RSF charges that a "third party", alluding to alleged Islamist Jihadist brigades backing the SAF, attacked its camp near Khartoum's Sports City. The majority of the fighting since April was initially limited to Khartoum and Darfur but has spread in recent months to central Sudan. The RSF's campaign of ethnic cleansing in West Darfur and its atrocity crimes in other areas are being used by the SAF and its Islamist backers in campaigns for arming civilians to defend themselves elsewhere, bringing the country closer to total civil war if the international community failed to press the belligerents into stopping their destruction of Sudan. When Hemedti, the head of the RSF, launched an attack on the country's main military air bases and the capital city of Khartoum. The majority of the fighting since April has taken place in Khartoum and Darfur. The RSF's brutal control of the latter region reignited the [ethnicized](#) repression by RSF members who had participated in the Darfur massacres of 2003.



The Tripartite Mechanism: Established in October 2021, the mechanism is composed of the African Union (AU), the intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the UN. This group's failure to secure a return to establish a transitional framework to democracy was mainly due to its lack of [credibility](#) towards pro-democracy groups and its inability to enforce its decisions. Both the [AU](#) and the [UN](#) have been accused of legitimizing the military junta and of excluding [pro-democracy](#) actors, favoring a political class which included coup-supporters, and ostracizing the rebel groups at the center of the pro-democracy movement.

The mechanism failed to both provide an inclusive process or to [alleviate the impact of sanctions](#) on a downward spiraling Sudanese economy. The appearance of the Quad and the integration of a new UN mission to Sudan (UNITAMS) into the Mechanism reinvigorated its position. The political muscle of the Quad and the perceived impartiality of the UN organ gave the Tripartite Mechanism enough sway so that it could jointly announce the signing of the PFA. After the outbreak of the conflict between the RSF and the SAF, the members of the Tripartite Mechanism had a hard time positioning themselves as mediators.

The Quad: Out of the Tripartite Mechanism's [failures](#) to enforce measures or to gather the different parties in Sudan came the Quad. This group, constituted of the US, the UK, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, wrote its first statement in November 2021 condemning the coup. This diplomatic alliance took up the space left by the Tripartite Mechanism. As sovereign countries capable of exerting more pressure on the military, the Quad favored the inclusion of more pro-democracy groups and ultimately got part of the FFC to sit down and negotiate for a transitional framework with the military bodies. The meeting would eventually lead to the signing of the PFA. Following the outbreak of the war between the RSF and the SAF, cracks between members of the Quad started to show, especially between [Saudi Arabia and the UAE](#). As both countries fought to influence Sudan and its privileged access to the Red Sea, the UAE and Saudi Arabia found themselves supporting opposite sides of the Sudanese civil-war. Since the beginning of the war, the United States and Saudi Arabia have held several talks in Jeddah but only managed to get both military parties to agree on ceasefires that they repeatedly failed to respect. As the war progresses, the USA and Saudi Arabia have found it harder to bring the actors around the table.

IGAD: A [renewed](#) effort by the IGAD to bring the SAF, the RSF and civilian actors came in late 2023. This new initiative has been [welcomed](#) by several civilian actors, political groups such as the FFC, DB and the RSF. However, the SAF has been conspicuously absent from major meetings in early 2024. [Pressured](#) by the Bashir era Islamists within the SAF, Burhan will not agree to meet Hemedti without condition as he [feels](#) the IGAD process will grant the RSF an international legitimacy it previously did not have.





Main Actors

One of the main obstacles to negotiating peace in Sudan is that there are too many actors. Although it might seem as though the present conflict is between the RSF and the SAF, the reality is much more complex. Civilian actors, as well as other armed groups, are a powerful force in Sudanese politics. Actors such as the civilian groups of the SPA and sectarian political parties, such as the Democratic Union Party (DUP) and the National Umma Party, were the most popular among the Sudanese population during the Bashir era. Although it is impossible to encapsulate this complexity, here is a cursory overview of the most relevant actors.

RSF (Rapid Support Forces): The RSF are a paramilitary forces created in 2013 from members of the Janjaweed, the militia responsible for what the ICC has deemed the “genocide” of Darfur. Ever since the RSF and the SAF took power in October 2021, cracks have started to appear between the two military groups. The lack of support for the coup and the sanctions that followed put the military bodies under pressure. As the Sudanese economy spiraled due to the sanctions, Hemedti started growing his support base, allying himself with the Sudanese political elite who were wary of the SAF and the pro-Islamist contingents within it. This tension burst into armed conflict in April 2023 when Hemedti took over the main air bases of the country. Since then, he has profited from his international alliances (see fig. 2) to fight this war, fashioning himself as a “reformer” coming to purge Sudan of Bashir-era elements and Islamists.

SAF (Sudanese Armed Forces): National army of the Republic of Sudan. After massive protests against Omar al Bashir in 2019, the Sudanese Armed Forces used the instability to take over the government and install themselves. Burhan, the leader of the SAF has used his position as the head of the country since 2019 to continue to profit off of state enterprises and to build ties with the governing elites of other countries, namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Russia (see fig.2).

Other Armed Groups: The landscape of military actors extends further than the two main bodies mentioned above to include several armed movements fighting the central government. Many of them were founded during the conflicts in Darfur and with South Sudan. They have diverging interests and political ambitions, although most focus on a greater decentralization of the Sudanese state. We find several of these groups as signatories of the Juba agreement with the civilian government. Many autonomous tribal militias tend to join one or the other of the belligerents based on local considerations of their communities.

Sudanese Resistance Committees: The Sudanese Resistance Committees have their roots in neighborhood associations founded during the Bashir era. Their goal was to protest against the government and the lack of a political alternative that represented them. They would become the spearheads of the pro-democracy protests during the 2019 revolt. After the beginning of the 2023 war, they took on the role of medics. They became the most effective force for the coordination of aid and evacuations in the main cities. They still continue to fight for a political alternative, organizing spontaneous protests to this day. Given their role and their pro-democracy message, they are one of the most influential groups within civil society even though they are sidelined by every major peace negotiation.

Sudanese Professional Associations (SPA): Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA): The SPA started out as a group of different professional and workers’ unions advocating for professional demands. Even though there were different professional coalitions during the 80s, the organization as we know it today started in 2012. In 2018, the union took on a more explicitly political role by organizing popular protests for the rise of the minimum wage among other economic reforms. These protests culminated into a demand for the ouster of al-Bashir and, in some ways foreshadowed the 2018/2019 protests spearheaded by the Resistance Committees. During the revolution, the SPA joined the FFC. However, this relationship would fall apart due to infighting during the transitional council’s tenure. Their position since the takeover in 2021 has been characterized by a refusal to negotiate with military actors and preferring instead to promote civil disobedience as their preferred method of action.

FFC (Freedom Forces Coalition): Wide political coalition of civilian coalitions of Sudanese groups created in January 2019 in the midst of the anti-Bashir protests. Within this organization, we find today, the most popular political opposition parties during the Bashir era, the National Umma Party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) the Sudan Congress Party, and smaller leftist and Arab socialist parties of the Baathist and Nasserite brands. They participated in the Sovereignty Council from August 2019 until the coup of 2021. At this point, the FCC was put in the uncomfortable position of either negotiating with the militaries, thereby legitimizing their rules, or refusing to come to the negotiation table, in the hopes that international pressure will make military actors concede to the demands of the FCC. This decision ultimately caused the FCC to split into two blocks. The FCC- Central Committee, which includes the Umma Party, decided to sign the PFA. The FCC- Democratic Block, including minority factions of the DUP, refused to sign. After the outbreak of the conflict, the FCC- DB has supported the SAF while the FCC- CC has remained neutral.

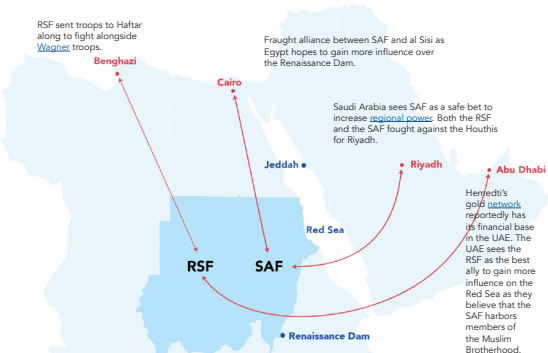


Fig. 2: Map representing the connections between military actors and other countries.

Ressources

Local experts to follow:

- **Dr Suliman Baldo** (@baldozer09): expert in justice, human rights and conflict resolution in Africa and served as the Africa head of International Crisis group, the International Center for Transitional Justice, and has also held human rights and mediation posts in the United Nations.
- **Mohanad Hashim** (@moehash1): British-Sudanese journalist working for the BBC reporting on the Middle East and Africa, with a special focus on Sudan. He posts regularly on twitter.

Websites tracking the conflict:

- **Sudan Transparency and Policy tracker:** This website develops high quality investigation and analysis of corruption. Featuring exclusively Sudanese voices, it works with civil society, national and international organizations.
- **Radio Dabanga:** Independent news website in Sudan offering news coverage as well as analysis.
- **ACLEd:** Provides bi-weekly updates on the developments on the frontlines of the conflict.

Books for background information:

- “Sudan’s Unfinished Democracy: The Promise and Betrayal of a People’s Revolution” by Alex de Waal, Justin Lynch, and W. J. Berridge
- “Sudan: The Contemporary Middle East” by Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim and Richard Lobban Jr.
- “Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror” by Mahmood Mamdani