

Commentary

SUDAN CONFLICT AND THE UAE'S STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT

The civil war in Sudan, ongoing since April 2023, has evolved into a protracted power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), with severe humanitarian and regional consequences. This article examines the conflict through the lens of the United Arab Emirates' strategic engagement, highlighting how Sudan's geopolitical location, gold resources, agricultural potential, and Red Sea access have positioned it as a key node in Abu Dhabi's regional ambitions. It traces the historical evolution of UAE-RSF ties, particularly through Sudan's participation in the Yemen war and the consolidation of RSF control over gold mining and trade networks linked to Dubai. The analysis further explores allegations of Emirati arms transfers to the RSF, the role of transnational logistics corridors, and the paradox of the UAE's dual posture as both mediator and alleged enabler of violence. The article argues that external economic and military involvement has intensified Sudan's internal conflict, prolonging instability and exacerbating humanitarian suffering across the Horn of Africa.

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Introduction

The Sudan conflict, which began in April 2023, continues to rage today and has become an unending struggle between the two warring factions. The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as "Hemeti", are the two rival factions. These two military officers played an important role in 2019 in removing Omar al-Bashir from his thirty-year (1989-2019) of authoritarian rule in Sudan. A Transitional Sovereignty Council, led by a civilian prime minister, was formed to oversee this democratic transition, but was subsequently disbanded following a military coup in 2022¹. This marked

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the beginning of a struggle for power between the two military units of the Sudan Armed Forces, which has now turned into a large-scale conflict endangering the further division of an already partitioned Sudan. There is a risk of a spillover effect to neighbouring countries of Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, the Central African Republic, Libya, and Egypt. Additionally, a prolonged conflict can destabilise this already burdened region with fragile countries and refugee crises. The strategic geolocation of Sudan in the Horn of Africa, its proximity to the Red Sea and the volatile Middle-East region have attracted regional as well as global players.

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This brings the United Arab Emirates (UAE) into the picture. Its strategic ambitions, economic networks, and dual image as both a mediator and a power broker in Africa and the Red Sea region make the UAE an important stakeholder in this conflict. Over the last decade, to secure trade routes, military footholds, and political influence along the Red Sea corridor, the UAE has invested heavily and has historically cultivated ties with various factions, especially with the RSF. It began in 2015 with the Saudi-led coalition. The UAE was an important cog in this coalition fighting against the Houthis in Yemen. Though Sudan sent troops from both the Sudanese Armed Forces as well as the Rapid Support Forces, the latter were more used as mercenaries, financially supported by the UAE, to take part in that expedition against the Houthis. This marked the beginning of the relationship between the UAE and the RSF. Over the years, both grew closer and established economic ties, mainly through the gold business, a precious metal abundant in Sudan. Thus, when the conflict broke out in Sudan, the UAE sided with the RSF – a faction with which it has historical ties.

Historical Ties Between Khartoum and Abu Dhabi

The year 2019 marked the end of thirty years of authoritarian and Islamist rule in Sudan. Omar al-Bashir, who came to power in 1989 through a coup d'état, went on to rule Sudan for three decades. His three decades of rule were a presidential authoritarian regime, initially a military-Islamist junta, later evolving into a personalist dictatorship under a nominally presidential constitution. In 2009 and 2010, the International Criminal Court issued two arrest warrants against Omar al-Bashir for crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide in Darfur, a region in the western part of Sudan.²

South Sudan, a region rich in oil, voted overwhelmingly (98.83% voted in favour) in the 2011 internationally watched referendum to secede from Sudan. Almost all exports of Sudan were oil, and more than 50% of its budget was funded through oil revenue. South Sudan took away nearly 75% of the oil fields, thus removing a major source of income for Sudan³. It worsened the economic conditions, skyrocketed the inflation, and depreciated the currency. An economically weaker and globally isolated Sudan needed immediate financial support.

This came in the form of the Saudi-led coalition, launched in 2015 to fight against the Houthis. Omar joined this coalition and offered troops and RSF fighters for deployment in Yemen. The RSF (Rapid Support Forces) was established around 2013, drawn from the Janjaweed militias that had fought in Darfur. Its commander, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (“Hemedti”), was directly loyal to Bashir, not to the regular army.

Sending troops to Yemen resulted in immediate aid of billions to Sudan, payment for troop deployments, diplomatic rehabilitation, and promises of agricultural and infrastructure investments from the UAE and Saudi Arabia. More importantly, the RSF deployed 14,000-40,000 troops over time, and it got paid in hundreds of millions. Much of this money went to Hemedti’s network, not to the formal Sudanese treasury. Between 2016-2018, RSF seized control of major gold mines in Darfur and elsewhere, notably Jebel Amer. Gold became Sudan’s main export after losing oil reserves to South Sudan, and the UAE became Sudan’s largest gold importer, estimated \$16 billion worth exported annually by 2018⁴. All these made the RSF a military force as well as an economic empire, with financial links directly to the UAE and Gulf networks. By 2018, Omar started facing civilian protests over rising prices, and his hold over Sudan weakened. The RSF, legalised and established by Omar in 2013, for support during exactly these types of uncertainties, did not come to his rescue. By 2018, it was financially independent, and after seeing the large-scale and nationwide nature of civilian protests and its history of bad human rights records in Darfur, it decided not to come to the aid of Omar. It supported the Sudanese Armed Forces in 2019 to end the thirty-year rule of Omar al-Bashir in Sudan.

Why Sudan Matters to the Emirates

Sudan occupies a special place in the UAE’s strategic calculus because of its geographic location, presence of arable lands, and gold reserves. It presents Abu Dhabi with the intersection of its three interests in the region, i.e. maritime strategy, security projection, and resource extraction. All three of these are vital for the UAE’s drive for regional influence.

The UAE aims to establish itself as a major logistics connector between Asia, Africa and Europe with its investment in African ports serving as key nodes linked to the Jebel Ali Port in Dubai. Sudan’s 700 km coastline on the Red Sea grants immense strategic value for this maritime ambition. Control over Port Sudan and the proposed Abu Amama port, developed by Abu Dhabi Ports and Invictus Investment, gives the UAE a strategic outpost connecting the Horn of Africa, the Suez Canal, and the Arabian Peninsula.

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Security is another interest that makes Sudan important. Since the Arab Spring, the UAE has pursued a security-first foreign policy in the region. To counter transnational Islamist networks, UAE exported counterinsurgency know-how and developed close relationships with many local armed groups to pursue its objectives. In the case of Sudan, RSF became the regional partner with which Abu Dhabi has cultivated its relations after their joint Operations against the Houthis in Yemen.

Sudan, often referred to as the Breadbasket of Africa⁵, has a vast agricultural potential. Its favourable climate and the presence of both the White Nile and Blue Nile provide it with a huge fertile area and abundant water resources. The Gezira Plain in the east-central part of Sudan, between these two rivers, is rich in silt deposited by the floods of the Nile. Sudan's agricultural endowment addresses the food insecurity of the UAE, a country with very limited arable land and water, which depends heavily on food imports. Sudan, to address the acute economic and financial challenges following the separation of South Sudan, implemented policy changes and allowed Gulf countries to invest in its agricultural sector. It offered them water and land in favourable conditions. Companies like Amtaar, IHC Food Holding⁶, GLB Invest, etc, have invested in the Sudanese Agriculture in hundreds of thousands of acres.

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The UAE's investments in the ports on the Red Sea give it a foothold in the Horn of Africa region. Similarly, by investing in agriculture, it is advancing its food-security strategy by diversifying its supply chains. The combination of above two factors makes Sudan important in the strategic calculations of Abu Dhabi.

Sudanese Gold-The RSF's Lifeline and Dubai's Treasure

The partition of South Sudan from Sudan in 2011 resulted in gold becoming the main source of income for Sudan, as South Sudan took away 75% of the oil reserves with it. This led Sudan to become dependent on its gold reserves for revenues and exports⁷. The significant increase in gold prices from the 2000s, along with its growing importance in Sudan's economy, spurred a boom in Sudan's gold mining sector. By 2012, it replaced oil as the main source of foreign currency. But there was a contradiction with the gold. In the export of oil, both production and export were controlled by the government. In the case of gold, the regulation became challenging due to the artisanal nature of its production. The Omar al-Bashir regime used violence and coercion, enforced by its security agencies, to have control over the gold-producing areas. It also allowed the SAF, the RSF, and the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) to export gold unofficially through their respective gold companies⁸. The SAF used state-owned companies, while the RSF exported through the companies owned privately by its commanders. Over the next few years, both used their influence in security and politics to expand their footprints in the gold mining sector. The 2021 coup, which removed the transitional government led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok (2019-2021), was also due to his reform initiatives, which threatened the economic powers of the security agencies⁹.

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One of the main factors contributing to the ongoing civil war in Sudan is also due to the growing competition between the SAF and the RSF in the gold mining and trade sectors. During Bashir's rule, he managed the rivalry by offering both parties lucrative incentives in the form of partnerships with external investors. Post 2021, the rapid expansion of the RSF holdings in the gold sector alarmed the SAF leadership. The competition between these two groups did not stop just in the mining sector, but expanded to other sectors of the economy, including agriculture, livestock and banking. These tensions and competition culminated in the beginning of the ongoing civil war on 15th April 2023.

The beginning of the conflict saw the RSF consolidating its dominance over gold-producing areas in Darfur and Kordofan. It also captured the currency printing house and a gold refinery in Khartoum, which contained almost \$150 million worth of gold¹⁰. These helped the RSF in financing its weapons and logistical costs. Both the SAF and the RSF are dependent on the proceeds from the exports of gold to sustain this war. The RSF, which controls several gold mines in the western part of Sudan, uses the neighbouring nations to export its gold to the UAE, a major hub of smuggled gold. The SAF, which has accused the UAE of supporting the RSF in terms of weapons, has even taken it to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). But, even the exports of the SAF, both licitly and illegally, to Egypt ultimately end up getting exported to the UAE. In 2024, according to a report from the Central Bank of Sudan, the SAF exported 97% of its gold to the UAE, worth billions of dollars. Thus, in a way, both the warring factions are sustaining this ongoing war through their exports of gold to a single country, namely the UAE.

But the question here arises- Why is the UAE taking a risk by supporting a group that has a history of human rights violations? There is more than one explanatory factor. The first is the strategic and economic competition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the two Arab Gulf states vying to expand their influence in Africa. Riyadh has been supporting the Burhan-led SAF, which is why the UAE is in alignment with the RSF. The second reason is the gold business. RSF chief Hemedti has established himself as a business tycoon and has business links with the UAE, primarily trading in gold. The third one is the personal connection between Hemedti and Mohamed bin Zayed (the Emirati President). They got in touch during the fight against the Houthis in Yemen in 2015, and since then, it has blossomed. The fourth one is SAF's close association with the Political Islam in Sudan. The UAE has tried hard not to allow the spread of such movements after the Arab Spring. To counter the spread of that, the UAE chose to party with the SAF.

Weapons from Abu Dhabi to Darfur?

Though the focus of this ongoing war has been on the two warring factions, the alleged supply of weapons to the RSF by the UAE is insufficiently scrutinised. Many independent investigations, UN expert panels and Human Rights Organisations have pointed to a sustained supply of sophisticated weaponry to the RSF by the UAE, despite humanitarian concerns and International Embargoes. The findings from the mortar rounds seized in North

Darfur in April 2025 substantiate the allegations. These rounds bore serial numbers identical to those which Bulgaria had exported to the UAE in 2019. It entailed a deliberate re-export of weapons from the stockpiles of the UAE to Sudan, a violation of the international restrictions on the supply of weapons to Sudan. Also, Amnesty International, in its findings in April 2025, identified advanced Chinese-manufactured GB50A guided bombs and Norinco AH-4 155 mm lightweight howitzers in RSF-held regions of Khartoum and North Darfur. The fragments of the GB50A recovered in March 2025, which were used in drone strikes, bore a 2024 manufacturing date, indicating a recent supply of these weapons. This finding is significant because the UAE is the only documented importer of the AH-4 howitzer, indicating re-export from the UAE is a plausible explanation for their presence on the Sudanese battlefields¹¹. Additionally, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported the presence of advanced weapons with the RSF. It included drones, multiple rocket launchers, anti-aircraft systems, and anti-tank guided missiles. Many of these weapons point to the weapon-procurement patterns of the UAE¹². HRW also brought up the existence of transnational logistics corridors. Neighbouring countries like Chad, Libya, and South Sudan are used by the RSF for the movement of weapons to Darfur and other RSF strongholds. These corridors, especially through eastern Chad, are believed to be supported by Emirati funding and infrastructure. The 2025 briefing on Sudan by the Small Arms Survey¹³ reveals the growth in the arsenal of the RSF, both in terms of quantity and technological sophistication. A major point to be noted is that the majority of these weapons match the weapons procured by the UAE in the last decade. This report highlights that the role of Abu Dhabi in shaping the fighting capabilities of the RSF is systemic, and not incidental or sporadic.

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Though many International Organisations and Independent Agencies' findings suggest the UAE's involvement in arms supply to the RSF, Abu Dhabi has denied all these allegations, stating that no substantiated evidence suggests its involvement in arming the RSF. However, the convergence of evidence collected by different agencies shows a pattern that is becoming difficult to dismiss: the overarching presence of the UAE's role in the weapon supply to the RSF.

Humanitarian and Regional Consequences

While the whole globe is fixated on the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Gaza Strip conflict, the nightmarish civil war in Sudan is not receiving such attention. The atrocities against the civilians, combined with famines in several regions, have led to the worst humanitarian

crises in the world. This conflict between the SAF and the RSF has collapsed the country's social, economic, and health infrastructure at an unprecedented rate. There is a systemic breakdown, as nearly 30 million people, around two-thirds of the population, require humanitarian assistance. Most of the urban centres, such as Khartoum, Omdurman, Bahri, El Geneina, Nyala, and El Fasher, have become battlefronts, forcing families to flee repeatedly as the frontline shifts. This conflict reached a new low when the RSF managed to gain control over El Fasher on 26th October 2025. It was the last remaining stronghold of the SAF in the Darfur region, which had been under siege for the past eighteen months. The paramilitary group trapped the civilians inside the city, killed people at gunpoint, and detained, tortured and raped many others¹⁴.

Today, more than 18 million Sudanese are facing acute hunger, and many other regions are approaching famine-like situations due to the blockade of the aid corridors and the collapse of the markets. Among the civilians, women and children are the worst affected, as millions of children are out of school, and conflict-related sexual violence has risen sharply.

This ongoing conflict has also generated powerful regional reverberations, which have strained the political and economic capacities of Sudan's neighbours. Chad, South Sudan, Egypt, and Ethiopia have received around four million refugees. These countries were already grappling with poverty, internal conflict and fragile humanitarian infrastructures. As the conflict goes on, and the flux of refugees to the neighbouring countries continues, this ongoing civil war in Sudan can also lead to a regional humanitarian crisis.

Conclusion

The ongoing civil war in Sudan has emerged as a defining case for understanding how external powers are shaping the regional African conflicts. In Sudan's case, the UAE has emerged as a significant external player, alongside Saudi Arabia. The role of Abu Dhabi has been paradoxical throughout this conflict. It is a member of Quad (the USA, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE), which has been leading negotiations to reach an agreement. However, it has also been alleged by multiple Independent Agencies that the UAE is supporting the RSF with advanced weapons, thus enabling the very conflict which it publicly seeks to de-escalate. Additionally, its ambition to have a presence in the Red Sea may face a hurdle if the war continues.

Moreover, the Sudan war demonstrates that external support, in the form of arms transfers, financial backing or political cover, intensifies the internal power struggles. The UAE's alleged role in facilitating weaponry to the RSF and the linkage of gold networks between the actors in conflict and Abu Dhabi underline how the Gulf involvement is sustaining this war. After more than two years of this fighting, several lessons stand out. First, a stricter international monitoring of arms flow is the need of the hour. It will prevent external actors from quietly shaping the battlefield. Moreover, the UAE's alleged roles should be verified and brought to the world's attention. Second, the proceeds from the gold trade are sustaining this war. Transparency and regulation of this trade are crucial for cutting off the financial incentives for armed groups.

Ultimately, the crisis in Sudan is not just a national crisis, but it serves as a lens through which we can view how the emerging powers engage in a contested space. The UAE's involvement in Sudan highlights both the possibilities and perils of external influence in African countries, underscoring the urgent need for accountability and locally anchored approaches to resolving this conflict.

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