



ANALYSES

Sudan's Crisis and the Implications for Its Neighbours



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The conflict in Sudan has prompted both Sudanese and refugees from neighbouring countries to flee the country. [Reuters]

Sudan plunged into violence on 15 April 2023 after an armed conflict erupted all over the country, but mainly in the capital, Khartoum, and the Darfur region. The clashes are the result of a power struggle between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which was created by former president Omar al-Bashir. The Sudanese army and RSF formed the military government of Sudan after the 2021 coup that ended the transitional government put in place after the fall of al-Bashir in 2019, thus resulting in Sudan being run by the army, with coup leader General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan as the de facto ruler. [\(1\)](#)

Since al-Bashir's departure, the head of RSF, General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, popularly known as Hemedti, has worked with Al-Burhan to keep the military in charge despite Al-Burhan's pledge of a civilian transition. However, it appears that neither Al-Burhan nor Hemedti plan to relinquish control since they disagree on a number of matters, the most current being how RSF paramilitaries should be integrated into the Sudanese army. [\(2\)](#)

The conflict and violence have serious implications not only for Sudan, as they have caused the deaths of 400 people and a humanitarian disaster, but also for its neighbours in the Horn of Africa, including South Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad and Libya, all of which are already dealing with various internal crises and instabilities.

The Horn of Africa

The conflict in Sudan poses a dire risk to the Horn of Africa, a large region in East Africa that has been battling different conflicts ranging from insecurity to protracted political strife to severe humanitarian situations worsened by one of the most severe and longest droughts in its recent history. The countries of the region—Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti—have also kept a keen interest in and focus on developments in Sudan, especially as there is increased global competition to dominate the region and control the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. [\(3\)](#)

The direct security implications of the crisis cannot be underestimated for Ethiopia, which borders Sudan to the west and South Sudan to the south-west. There are many intertwining files, interdependence issues and political exchanges between Sudan and Ethiopia. This made Addis Ababa the first suspect for the international media, which accused it of supporting one of the parties in the Sudanese conflict, particularly because Ethiopia has armed movements that move in the disputed border strip in the region of al-Fashaga that have been a cause of concern and escalation from time to time. [\(4\)](#) This also explains why a Sudanese media outlet alleged days after fighting broke out in Sudan that Addis Ababa tried to take advantage of the Sudanese conflict by deploying its army in the border region and pursue its objectives in Sudan, [\(5\)](#) an allegation that Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed refuted. [\(6\)](#)

Ethiopia has yet to heal completely from the armed conflict in Tigray that occurred between November 2020 and November 2022. [\(7\)](#) The conflict triggered a refugee and displacement crisis that is still ongoing and exacerbates deep-seated ethnic tensions among Ethiopians themselves and between the federal government and the ethno-linguistically based regional states. Sudan was a destination and transit country for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants from neighbouring countries. It received more than 50,000 Ethiopian refugees in already impoverished parts of eastern Sudan during the Tigray War. [\(8\)](#) However, the Sudanese conflict has put Ethiopia on the receiving end, as some Sudanese and foreigners in Sudan have fled the violence, while foreign countries are also relying on Addis Ababa to evacuate their citizens. This also means that Eritrean refugees in Sudan will need to seek another host country if the conflict intensifies.

It could be said that the volatile situation in the countries of the Horn of Africa and other countries neighbouring Sudan is a major detriment to these countries' capacity to help broker peace and avoid conflict. For example, the Tigray War in Ethiopia led to a decline in Addis Ababa's capacity to help broker Sudan's fragile transition to democracy, a task Abiy Ahmed's government gladly took on in 2019. It also seems like the Ethiopian government understood the repercussions of what's going on in

Sudan when it called for peace between the two warring parties. Prime Minister Ahmed stated that the ongoing clashes "contradict longstanding Sudanese norms and values." [\(9\)](#)

Although there are concerns that failure to contain the situation as soon as possible may exacerbate the security crisis in the region, this is happening as the new Somali government of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud prioritises taking on al-Shabab, which still remains entrenched in Somalia and some of its neighbours. The situation also implies that the arc of insecurity in East Africa extends deep into southern Tanzania and Mozambique, two of Africa's numerous locations where terrorist insurgencies are still active.

Another point of concern is the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which has been dogged by controversy ever since construction started. Egypt and Sudan are of the position that the project could pose a threat to their own Nile dams and their citizens. All parties are now interested in developments in Sudan, [\(10\)](#) as the directions of any new government in Khartoum will influence the project and tip the balance of the dispute, especially as Sudan is seen by some as lenient towards the project.

South Sudan: Humanitarian, security and economic implications

For South Sudan, which borders Sudan to the north, the repercussions will not only be security-related but also economic and social. The conflict is also reminiscent of the war and crisis that led to the South Sudanese state coming into existence in 2011 following decades of civil war. [\(11\)](#) The ongoing crisis, if not contained swiftly, has the capacity to escalate into a full-blown war and may lead to further disintegration in Sudan, especially with regard to the critical situations and the long and renewed conflicts in Darfur. [\(12\)](#)

The loss of oil revenues, which had previously accounted for more than half of Sudan's revenue and 95% of its exports, was the biggest economic shock brought on by South Sudan's secession in 2011. Recent sources indicate that South Sudan delivers 170,000 barrels of oil per day to its northern neighbours through a pipeline, [\(13\)](#) which may be hindered by the current conflict.

Another implication is that of South Sudanese refugees: due to war throughout their country, nearly 2.3 million South Sudanese fled to neighbouring countries. There are 800,000 South Sudanese refugees living in Sudan alone. This implies that the spread of fighting to numerous Sudanese cities may force these refugees to search for alternative safe havens or make the difficult decision to return to their country, South Sudan, which may complicate efforts to provide assistance to the millions of people who also fled their homes due to internal crisis and civil unrest.

Central African Republic: Instability and insecurity

Sudan has been accused of being a part of the conflict and instability in the Central African Republic (CAR), which began in 2013, with claims that some Sudanese internal security agents and former military officers were sheltering and arming forces linked to CAR rebel groups hoping to overthrow the regime in Bangui. This was confirmed in January when Hemedti declared that he had helped prevent a coup against the CAR government from taking place over the border in Sudan. [\(14\)](#).

Reports also link Hemedti's RSF to the Russian Wagner group, which controls diamond and gold mines on either side of the CAR-Sudan border. CAR opposition forces accuse the RSF of supporting Russian mercenaries within CAR borders; and different reports since the start of the Sudan conflict claim that Wagner might have been arming the RSF to aid its fight against the Sudanese army. [\(15\)](#) While RSF has refuted these claims, it shows the complicated relationship between the Sudanese crisis and the conflicts in CAR and how the outcomes in Khartoum could affect the government of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in Bangui.

Chad's political destabilisation

Chad is considered one of the countries most affected by the ongoing conflict in Sudan due to the historical, social and cultural relationship between the ethnic groups of both countries. [\(16\)](#) Most Chadian families are not devoid of social and blood ties with Sudan, a destination for thousands of Chadian students. Similarly, Chad hosts about 400,000 Sudanese, [\(17\)](#) and according to Daoud Yaya Brahim, Chad's defence minister, at least 320 Sudanese soldiers fled to Chad days after the Sudanese violence broke out. [\(18\)](#)

The Sudanese conflict may aggravate the existing suspicion between Khartoum and N'Djamena, as both sides during the regimes of Omar al-Babir and Idriss Deby used rebels and armed opposition in the border region for their personal political agendas. The ongoing conflict in Sudan has raised questions among Sudanese and Chadians about the ethnicity of some of Sudan's generals, such as Hemedti, and the target of his RSF in relation to the Chadian Arabs.

It is worth mentioning that Chad faces various threats, including rebellions and armed gangs along the northern Libyan and Sudanese borders. N'Djamena has shown concern that instability and insecurity in Sudan might further equip its rebels and armed opposition. Former president Deby was killed in clashes with rebels in the north of the country. His son, General Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno, who was named interim president after the demise of his father, is unsettled by any unfamiliar movements along his country's borders. The increased presence of the RSF in the Chad-Sudan border areas, which run from the trijunction with Libya in the north to the trijunction with CAR in the south, was the subject of recent tension between the two countries. This prompted a discussion between both governments in January during which they agreed to deploy Sudanese and Chadian forces along the joint border in West Darfur State. [\(19\)](#)

The exacerbation of the illegal migration crisis in Libya

Under the rule of Omar al-Bashir and Muammar Gaddafi, the relationship between Sudan and Libya was tense. The two leaders exchanged allegations of smuggling weaponry across the border in order to gain more influence in each other's national politics and power struggles. During the Libyan crisis of 2011, Khartoum provided security and military aid to Libyan rebels fighting the Gaddafi regime, as well as assisted the National Transitional Council in gaining control. [\(20\)](#) Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir applauded Gaddafi's fall in 2012, [\(21\)](#) addressing a joint press conference in Khartoum with Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and stating that his country had no choice but to back the Libyan people. [\(22\)](#)

Many Sudanese militants who fought on opposing sides of the war that divided Libya in 2011 returned to Sudan in subsequent years, escalating tensions in Sudan's western Darfur region. Libya's involvement in the Sudanese crisis has not been determined, although there is an allegation that Khalifa Haftar, Commander of the Libyan National Army, assisted in preparing Sudan's RSF for battle in the months preceding the ongoing fighting. [\(23\)](#)

Another ramification is humanitarian and migratory issues, as human traffickers, like in Libya, may take advantage of the situation in Sudan, which has functioned as a departure and transit point for people attempting to reach Europe through Libya. Both countries are also on major drug and human trafficking routes.

Foreign actors and outside interests

Different reports of foreign interference in Sudan mean that each foreign power is trying to secure its interests in Sudan and that neighbouring countries could be used as a launchpad or to influence the conflict based on the alliance of each country and its support for the warring parties.

The Gulf countries and Turkey are fighting for dominance in the Horn of Africa in order to control the Red Sea, and their impact may be observed via several domestic issues in some countries of the Horn. Coupled with their economic interests, some Gulf states, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, have been implicated in the Sudanese situation since 2018 as a result of their support for some Sudanese military generals and efforts to shape the country's political events, as some of them see the transition from al-Bashir's rule as a way to roll back what some saw as Islamist influence and stabilise the Middle East and North Africa. [\(24\)](#)

Sudan could also become another battleground for the West, which backed the ouster of al-Bashir but was tardy to rally around an election transition, versus Russia, which worked out a deal with al-Bashir for Sudan to host its naval base. While the Russia-Sudan naval deal is still under review, Moscow is growing in influence in the Sahel and is present in the CAR and Libya. Going by the recent statements from the Sudanese army, refutations from the RSF of receiving support from Wagner, and the report of the involvement of Haftar, who controls a large portion of Libya's east, the mistrust between Sudan and its neighbours, particularly Egypt, Libya, Chad, Ethiopia and Eritrea, will raise fears of a long-drawn-out conflict in Sudan fuelled by outside interests.

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