



# ESCALATION PATHWAYS TO THE APRIL WAR AND THE DYNAMICS OF SUDAN'S POLITICAL ECONOMY

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Cover: Smoke rises over Khartoum as Sudan's army and RSF clash, escalating conflict since April 2023. (Photo: Osman Bakir, Anadolu Agency).

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## Summary

This paper analyzes the escalation processes that led to the outbreak of the April 2023 war in Sudan, based on Wolfram Lacher's theoretical framework of "escalation processes". The paper focuses on tracing the escalatory trajectories that preceded the war, analyzing the complex interplay between structural, political, and economic factors, as well as the impact of the political economy on the dynamics of the conflict and its escalation to full-scale war.

The paper highlights the analytical value of documenting and understanding the chronology of events and the political and security decisions that shaped the paths of escalation and shows that the transition from political conflict to armed war was not the result of a sudden event, but rather the culmination of a series of successive escalatory processes. It also highlights the concept of path dependence, as decisions made early in the conflict contributed to a chain of escalatory events that became increasingly difficult to reverse, even if the original objectives of the conflict evolved. The paper examines how interactions between the Sudanese army leadership and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led to increased tensions, from attempts at political maneuvering and polarization to the use of violence as a tool to achieve political goals.

The paper makes an important contribution by linking Wolfram Lacher's theory of gradual escalation to the complex factors that contributed to supporting this escalation trajectory. The analysis reveals that the political economy of the war was not merely a background factor but a significant driver of escalation. Control over economic resources shaped the decisions of the conflicting parties and reinforced their calculations to maximize the benefits of the war, even as its humanitarian and political costs rose.

The paper focuses on how the expected economic gains of the conflicting parties influenced their decisions to continue escalation. It also shows how external support and the intersections of regional interests directly interacted with escalation dynamics, which contributed to minimizing the chances of de-escalation and prolonging the war.

The paper also adds an important analytical dimension by understanding the dynamics of the political economy of the war in Sudan, showing how

external alliances were not just auxiliary factors, but became influential elements in the escalation processes, further complicating the conflict and making peace more difficult to achieve. It also highlights how looting and pillage became economic incentives for fighters and warring parties, helping to prolong the war and foster an informal war economy.

In conclusion, the paper presents a composite analytical framework that enhances our understanding of how the interplay between political economy and power struggles can drive successive escalatory dynamics, ultimately culminating in all-out war. This analytical framework invites policymakers and researchers to look deeply into the causes of the outbreak of war in Sudan, considering the complex and intertwined economic, social, and geopolitical dynamics. This analysis supports policymakers and researchers in adopting a more holistic and realistic approach to understanding the causes of the war and the mechanisms of its continuation, thereby contributing to the development of policies aimed at achieving long-term stability and peace in Sudan.

## 1. Introduction

Since independence in 1956, Sudan has suffered repeated political upheavals, and armed conflicts and internal wars have been prominent features of the country's modern history. The dynamics of these conflicts have varied, with varying levels of violence and a wide range of actors and motivations. These conflicts have been heavily influenced by the country's colonial legacy and the centralized state structure Sudan inherited at independence.

These crises culminated on 15 April 2023, with the outbreak of an armed conflict between the country's two largest military factions in the capital Khartoum. This conflict later escalated into a bloody war that spread to most regions of Sudan, leaving behind one of the largest humanitarian crises the world is currently witnessing.

Political narrative that focus solely on political-power struggles often overshadow the role of economic drivers and the emergent dynamics that create fresh triggers to perpetuate conflict, as has happened during the April 2023 war.

This study aims to analyze the complex interplay

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between economic, social, and geopolitical factors and dynamics, on the one hand, and political power, on the other, within the context of the political economy of war. It seeks to uncover the incentives and motivations that influenced the political decisions that led to the outbreak, intensification, and continuation of the conflict. Accordingly, the study asks three central questions:

- How did the escalation paths between the two parties to the conflict evolve until the moment the war broke?
- How did incentives and material gains influence the political decisions that led to the April 2023 war in Sudan?
- How do intersecting political and economic factors contribute to the war's continuation, financing, and bloc formation?

This study puts forward the hypothesis that the upward spiral of power struggle intertwined with structural legacies – such as the violent political economy of these armies and the hybrid governance components during the transition – and paved the way for armed escalation once political instruments failed. It also assumes that expected gains outweighed both the costs of war and the costs of continued political deadlock and that latent drivers (e.g. power consolidation) and material factors (e.g. external support, resource control) helped sustain the conflict.

Additionally, the study assumes that the political and paramilitary blocs, existing or emerging because of the conflict, hold divergent strategic interests. Some factions are unwilling to end the war unless the interests they created and expanded during the conflict are preserved, while others favor ending the war and returning to the status quo ante, before 15 April.

The study employs a process-tracing methodology, a qualitative analytical approach particularly suited to examining the causal mechanisms behind complex political phenomena such as Sudan's April 2023 war. This method goes beyond identifying simple correlations by uncovering how and why economic and material incentives shaped political decisions and actions that led to the conflict.

In this study, process tracing is used to analyze the trajectories of political transformations during the transitional period and following the military coup

and to identify the stages of the escalation processes that culminated in the outbreak of war. This requires a detailed description of the phenomena observed at each stage of these trajectories, as such descriptions serve as foundational elements for tracing the processes under investigation. Drawing on what David Collier terms “intensive description,” the study applies sequence analysis, explaining the outcomes and consequences of the phenomenon by referencing events as they unfold over time and highlighting the sequence of contributing factors.

With this approach, process tracing enables the identification of critical turning points during the transitional period and following the military coup, the testing of the role of incentives and perceived gains, and the mapping of escalation dynamics. The study will rely on primary data sources, including interviews with academics and government actors, as well as a sample of visual and print media. It will also utilize secondary sources, including academic references and scholarly papers.

The study is divided into three main sections:

The first section addresses, in its first part, the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study, along with an examination of grievances and conflicts – specifically the narratives of Sudan's civil wars and their comparison to the April war. The second part focuses on analyzing the narratives of recent civil wars in Sudan's modern history, comparing them to the discourse and stated objectives of the current war.

The second section presents a chronological map of the escalation events during and after the transitional period. It explores the phases of polarization among key actors, the formation of alliances and divisions, and the mobilization between the Rapid Support Forces and the army, with violence emerging as a strategic tool.

The third and final section presents the findings and conclusion of the study.

### 1.1. The Concept of Escalation and the Limits of Interpretation

The analytical approach of this study is based on a key theoretical concept: Wolfram Lacher's framework of escalation processes. This concept is grounded

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in the idea that the shift from peace to war is not a sudden event, but rather involves complex dynamics of sequential escalation processes that can be traced over time. It moves beyond simplistic assumptions that civil wars begin through abrupt events such as military coups or violent uprisings. Instead, it views war as the culmination of interrelated political, economic, and social factors that have gradually intensified.

One of the main pillars of Wolfram Lacher's theory is the idea of path dependence. Early decisions and actions in a conflict lead to a series of escalatory events that eventually reach a point where de-escalation becomes extremely difficult. Lacher argues that once a certain threshold of escalation is crossed, de-escalation becomes unlikely, even if the original goals of the conflict have become unattainable. Thus, the outbreak of war becomes a direct consequence of path dependence.

At the same time, escalation taken in a conflict is not simply a reaction to an adversary's actions but is often a strategic process driven by a political economy assessment that includes short-term gains, such as economic exploitation or military superiority, as well as long-term gains, such as consolidating power or changing regional or international alliances.

While Lacher's theory primarily focuses on the internal dynamics of escalation, it also emphasizes that there is no single path to civil war, but rather multiple distinct trajectories, each characterized by different types of escalation processes. In this context, the role of external actors and international pressures can also be considered. In many cases, the involvement of external powers, whether economic, military, or political can reinforce the continuation of conflict, even when the costs of war are immense. These external actors may see strategic value in prolonging the conflict or in supporting a particular party, thereby complicating the escalation process, exacerbating the conflict, and providing new incentives for local actors to continue fighting, even after their own resources have been depleted.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, a distinction must be made between the concept of escalation processes as causal mechanisms that can be traced before the beginning of an armed conflict and during its occurrence, and

the mechanisms underlying escalation itself as a strategic action taken or allowed to occur by the parties involved.

Despite this detailed explanation that the theory gives to tracing escalation processes - how the conflict grows from limited confrontations to full-scale war - it does not focus on whether escalation is the cause of war or merely a consequence. This limits its treatment of the root causes of war. Nevertheless, this explanatory framework opens the door to looking at the dynamics that are generated before and during a war, which helps in understanding the trajectory of the conflict.

Civil wars often result from a complex interplay of structural grievances and dynamic processes. In particular, radicalization (the move toward extreme tactics) and militarization (the preference for organized violence) become central drivers when state authority collapses or loses legitimacy.

Traditional theories linking structural and economic factors to war have pointed to factors such as poverty, institutional weakness, and ethnic diversity as being associated with civil conflicts, but they often fail to explain how such conditions escalate into war. Bargaining failure, on the other hand, focuses on strategic interactions and identifies issues such as information asymmetry, commitment difficulties, and indivisible interests as catalysts for conflict. However, they struggle to explain why some negotiation failures turn into war, while others lead to non-violent outcomes.

A more nuanced understanding emerges when civil wars are situated within cycles of tension, where radicalization and militarization are seen as two central mechanisms driving the shift from non-violent to violent conflict. Radicalization refers to a shift toward the adoption of extreme tactics by the conflicting parties, while militarization reflects an escalation to organized violence as the preferred strategy. These processes are intensified in environments marked by crises of state authority or legitimacy, where multiple actors compete for control and the collapse of institutional cohesion heightens the likelihood of sustained violence.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wolfram Lacher, "How Does Civil War Begin? The Role of Escalatory Processes", *Violence: An International Journal*, 3(2) (2022), 139-161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/26330024221130364>

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Florea, "Theories of Civil War Onset: Promises and Pitfalls." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. 24 May 2017; <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-325>

This perspective is in line with Lacher's emphasis on escalation processes, which highlights how smaller or fragmented conflicts become larger conflicts through feedback loops of violence and power struggles.<sup>3</sup> By situating civil wars within such escalatory dynamic frameworks, it becomes possible to trace how structural conditions, actors' strategies, and the interplay of violence ultimately contribute to the outbreak of large-scale conflict. This understanding provides an essential analytical lens for studying civil wars as outcomes of both structural fragility and escalatory processes toward war.

## **1.2. Narratives of Grievances and Power Struggles in Sudan**

### **1.2.1. War of the South**

The first armed conflict in Sudan erupted with the mutiny of the Equatorial Battalion of the Sudanese army in the city of Torit, South Sudan, on 18 August 1955, just before the country's independence from British colonial rule. This conflict later evolved into a full-scale civil war, which only ended definitively with the Naivasha Peace Agreement of 2005, after which Sudan separated into two countries following the independence of South Sudan.

The war's roots lay in colonial-era grievances – especially among the southern (Equatorial) communities – dating back to the 1922 Closed Districts Ordinance. After independence, these tensions deepened under a northern elite that marginalized and discriminated against Southerners, stoking resentment over wealth distribution and political representation.<sup>4</sup> Sharp disputes also emerged over the distribution of wealth and political power, stemming from deep contradictions between the central government and the country's peripheries. Following General Omar Al-Bashir's 1989 coup, the Islamist Salvation regime imposed an Islamic system, which added a religious dimension and transformed an already complex conflict into an ideologically

<sup>3</sup> Lacher, "How Does Civil War Begin?"

<sup>4</sup> When jobs were Sudanized after independence, only three out of eight hundred jobs were given to southerners. To read more, see Dr. Abdullah Ali Ibrahim's article: <https://www.medameek.com/?p=137277>.

driven civil war.

### **1.2.2. Conflict in Darfur**

Before the North-South conflict came to an end, a new armed conflict erupted in the Darfur region in 2003. While it partly extended from existing tribal disputes, its roots were primarily political and centered on demands for rights and development.<sup>5</sup>

In 2003, a group of armed movements that had begun fighting the central government in Khartoum announced a set of political and developmental demands. In response, the government launched a military campaign while also exploiting longstanding ethnic divisions in the Darfur region,<sup>6</sup> in an attempt to quell the rebellion in Darfur by arming specific tribal groups opposed to the armed movements and including them in the border guards. This was the nucleus of what was later known as the "Janjaweed", and the Rapid Support Forces that are currently fighting the Sudanese army represent its latest evolution. The conflict in Darfur witnessed numerous cycles of escalation and de-escalation through the signing of several peace agreements. However, these agreements failed to extinguish the flames of war permanently, especially as ethnic and regional tensions in the region deepened. In this context, political economy researcher Professor Khalid El-Tijani adds another factor contributing to the perpetuation of the conflict and its effects in Darfur. He explains: "This factor relates to the very nature of the peace agreements, which took an elitist approach by being concluded with the leadership of the armed movements and granting them shares of power from the central government, without genuinely addressing the underlying issues and consequences of the conflict." He goes on to say: "This clientelist logic deepened vertical divisions within those armed movements as factions competed for larger portions of power, thereby reinforcing the continuation of the conflict."<sup>7</sup>

A critically important feature emerges in this context, relating to the underlying causes of these conflicts and the dynamics that later developed during them which played a significant role in shaping

<sup>5</sup> Read more: The Darfur Crisis from 2003 to 2016: <https://n9.cl/bki1m>.

<sup>6</sup> Darfur Crisis, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Khaled Tijani, personal interview, researcher in political economy, Cairo, 11/18/2024.

the trajectories of escalation and the outcomes of these wars. In the case of the South Sudan war, the religious and ideological framing and mobilization carried out by the Salvation regime based on this narrative played a key role in portraying the war as one of identity and existential struggle. This deeply entrenched the nature of the conflict and ultimately led to the path of secession and division. In the case of the Darfur conflict – which did not differ significantly in its early narrative framing by rebels opposing the regime – the government's policies of exploiting existing ethnic divisions in the region between “Arab components and African components” and the “privatization of war”.<sup>8</sup> The formation of paramilitary militias based on these divisions played a major role in escalating identity- and ethnicity-based conflict in the region and across the country. In this form, the conflict acquired new incentives for continuation and expansion.

In addition to this, one can observe how power operates within the regime when managing the state, especially during times of war, peace negotiations, and loyalty-building as a strategy under this model. This was exemplified in the peace agreements related to the Darfur issue, which resembled elitist deals that failed to address the structural causes of the conflict. Instead, they focused on co-opting the leadership of armed movements into the state apparatus to neutralize them. This reinforced vertical divisions within these movements and gave the conflict a new dimension.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in both the South and Darfur conflicts, the trajectories evolved in a complex manner due to successive escalatory processes and violence, turning these conflicts into protracted wars.

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<sup>8</sup> The term “privatization of war” refers to the use of civilians and private militias to perform tasks previously overseen by governments or armies, such as providing military or security services. This includes hiring private companies to provide military equipment, provide logistical support, train soldiers, or even carry out combat missions in some cases. Among the reasons behind privatization in this field are cost-cutting, greater flexibility in managing resources, and reducing the political or legal risks associated with the military, especially in civil wars: Deborah Avant, “The Privatization of Security and Change in the Control of Force.” *International Studies Perspectives* 5, no. 2 (2004): 153-57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44218877>

<sup>9</sup> For more on this, see Alex de Waal, ed., *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*, Cambridge, MA: Global Equity Initiative, Harvard University Press, 2007; Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power*, London: Polity Press, 2015.

### **1.3. The Legacy of Long Wars and its Impact on the Trajectory of Political Economy**

This long legacy of wars has left a range of repercussions on the nature of Sudan's political economy that are particularly relevant to the current April war and can be illustrated by tracing the dynamics that have unfolded.

The secession of South Sudan led to major changes in the trajectory of Sudan's “rentier economy”,<sup>10</sup> which had taken shape through the substantial revenues generated from oil discovered in the southern region in the late 1990s. The “Inqaz” regime had sought to transform Sudan's economy into a rent-based model administered through this vital resource. It consolidated its political and economic power by channeling oil revenues into the creation of vast economic networks, banks, and companies either directly or indirectly controlled by the regime, especially under the strain of international economic sanctions. These revenues also fueled the militarization of the economy, with a large portion of the national budget directed toward defense and security, thereby reinforcing the military's expanding control over major enterprises across various sectors.<sup>11</sup>

With the loss of its oil resources following the independence of South Sudan, gold emerged as a new primary resource in Sudan's political economy – an attempt to compensate for the loss and continue along the same rentier path. Gold extraction grew increasingly important, and by 2022, gold exports had reached \$2 billion, accounting for 46% of Sudan's

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<sup>10</sup> A rentier economy is a type of economic system that relies heavily on revenues generated from non-productive sources or non-renewable activities, such as the extraction of natural resources (oil, gas, minerals, etc.) or returns from financial investments, rather than investing in productive sectors such as industry or agriculture. In this system, revenues generated from natural resources or other sources of fixed income are the main driver of the economy: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41857943>.

<sup>11</sup> To read more about the military's economic enterprises, refer to this report, “[Its protector is its thief](#)”, by the Center for Advanced Defense Studies.

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total exports.<sup>12</sup> The United Arab Emirates has become the exclusive and largest market for these gold exports. The environmental nature of this resource, being decentralized and easier to extract compared to oil, has facilitated its use in financing armed groups in conflict zones. A vivid example is Jabal Amer in Darfur, where control over the area became a central point of contention between rebel movements and pro-government militias.<sup>13</sup>

This shift toward a new alternative resource continued with the outbreak of the Darfur conflict in 2003 and the formation of the Janjaweed militias loyal to the regime. These militias later underwent a structural transformation into an official force under the name RSF, formally legalized through a special law passed by the National Congress Party's parliament in 2017.<sup>14</sup> It was granted significant economic privileges under the Al-Bashir regime, particularly in the gold sector, after it took control of Jabal Amer and established several gold export companies.<sup>15</sup> Sudan's map of external alliances also witnessed a shift, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates playing an increasingly prominent role. The UAE, in particular, emerged as Sudan's largest trading partner. One key indication of this growing relationship was the significant role the UAE played in supporting the lifting of economic sanctions during the Al-Bashir era.<sup>16</sup> Sudan's participation in Operation Decisive Storm alongside the UAE and Saudi Arabia further confirmed the deepening ties between the Islamist regime affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan and the regional powers opposing that movement.

Sudan's rent-based exports, primarily gold and the military battalions deployed in the 2015 Operation Decisive Storm, were a decisive factor in

<sup>12</sup> [Official: Gold revenues accounted for 44 percent of Sudan's exports in 2022](#), CNN Economics, 22/01/2023.

<sup>13</sup> Luke Patey, "Oil, Gold, and Guns: The Violent Politics of Sudan's Resource Re-Curse", *Environment and Security*, 2(3), 412-430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27538796241272367>

<sup>14</sup> [Sudan's parliament passes new RSF law](#), Asharq Alawsat, 17/01/2017.

<sup>15</sup> The RSF has been associated with several companies working in the fields of gold mining. To read more about this topic, please visit Al Fakher and Al Junaid. See also Patey, "Oil, Gold, and Guns".

<sup>16</sup> [Bashir: The UAE played an effective role in lifting US sanctions on Sudan](#), Eram News, 17/10/2016.

strengthening ties with Gulf states. These resources also played a key role in enabling the RSF, heavily involved in both gold extraction and the Yemen war, to cultivate independent foreign relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. This dynamic significantly boosted the RSF's financial resources and reinforced its autonomy from the country's traditional military and security establishment.

As a result of these shifting dynamics, the RSF's sources of funding expanded significantly from limited spoils and informal support from the political regime to a more entrenched model backed by foreign relations with a powerful regional actor. The RSF evolved from a militia to an official force legalized by the Sudanese Parliament, receiving special financial resources and political backing, particularly from the head of state. This status was reinforced after the 2019 revolution due to the RSF's role in overthrowing the Bashir regime and the power dynamics at the time, with its commander becoming the second-in-command in the state after the head of army and state.

Thus, the shifting trajectories of Sudan's political economy under the weight of recurring wars played a critical role in shaping regional alliances and enabling the rise of new elites embedded in militarization and militia networks. These transformations created major structural obstacles to the political transition, forming the underlying political-economic and geopolitical environment that helped escalate the current conflict between the country's rival military forces. The following escalation map will illustrate this trajectory, providing a sequential analysis of the transitional period, the October coup that followed, and the chain of events leading to the outbreak and intensification of the war, along with its consequences.

## 2. The Map of Escalation Processes in the Political Transition

Sudan is experiencing a politically turbulent and complex period. Since the fall of the Bashir regime and the onset of the transitional period, tensions began to emerge within the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) alliance and its internal factions, as well as between the FFC and the military component.

These tensions later shifted inward, manifesting as power struggles within the military component itself, ultimately culminating in the outbreak of the 15 April war.

This section traces the key phases of escalation that led to the eruption of the April 2023 conflict. It examines the initial stages of the power struggle, identifying and analyzing critical turning points and periods of mounting tension between the RSF and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), as well as the role of other actors during the pre-war period.

The paper then moves on to investigate how political discourse and alliances within Sudan fractured following the 2021 coup, deepening the divide between the RSF and the SAF. It examines the processes of escalation and mobilization, exploring how each side rallied its forces, resources, and narratives to legitimize its position while delegitimizing the other. Finally, the paper analyzes the use of violence as a strategic tool, focusing on how both parties increasingly came to view violence as a necessary or inevitable means to achieve their objectives, culminating in the outbreak of the April 2023 war.

Since the Transitional Military Council (TMC) assumed power in Sudan, a protracted negotiation process began – initially involving the TMC and various civilian actors, and eventually narrowing to negotiations between the TMC and the Forces of FFC. Despite the military's reluctance and slow pace in the negotiations, the persistence of mass protests and rising tensions, especially following the violent dispersal of the sit-in at army headquarters pressured the military into further engagement<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> The dispersal of the leadership sit-in represented a “huge escalatory step using violence” to reverse the democratic transition process before it began. This can be attributed to fears associated with curtailing the authoritarian ambitions of the military component and the economic gains enjoyed by both the army and the RSF. It may not have been possible to return to negotiations without the escalation of events and pressures generated by the revolutionary movement, in addition to an important factor, which was the intervention of an by the Ethiopian president and the African Union envoy. This reinforced what Meninga and Borok said about the consequences of escalation after negotiations, that “escalation after negotiations reduces the likelihood of subsequent negotiations, but the impact of this reduction varies depending on the presence of a third party, as the third party can play a role in mitigating the effects of escalation by offering incentives to resume talks or addressing concerns.” See Elizabeth J Menninga, Alyssa K Prorok, “Battles and Bargains: Escala-

This ultimately led the TMC to sign the Constitutional Declaration, resulting in the formation of a broad alliance between the FFC and the military council. The Declaration set a 39-month transition, after which elections would be held. It also established key transitional institutions.<sup>18</sup> With an emphasis on prioritizing peacebuilding during the first six months of the transitional period, efforts were directed toward resolving conflicts in Sudan's war-affected regions. As a result, the ruling coalition expanded to include signatories of the Juba Peace Agreement, whose provisions were incorporated into the Constitutional Declaration. The Transitional Sovereignty Council signed this agreement with armed groups within the Sudan Revolutionary Front, which comprised five armed movements and four political organizations, most notably the Sudan Liberation Movement led by Minni Arko Minnawi, and the Justice and Equality Movement led by Gibril Ibrahim.<sup>19</sup>

## **2.1. Polarization and Maneuvering Among the Components of the Transitional Period**

Disagreements within the civilian leadership began early in the transitional period and were reflected in deep divisions within the civilian component and its allied coalitions. These tensions first appeared when the Umma Party froze its activities within the FFC, followed by internal splits within the Sudanese Professionals Association and the withdrawal of the Communist Party. Eventually, the FFC itself fractured into two competing blocs: the Central Council and the National Consensus Group, the latter of which included two signatories to the Juba Peace Agreement. These divisions significantly hindered the completion of the transitional structures outlined

tion, Commitment, and Negotiations in Civil War”, *International Studies Quarterly*, 65(2), June 2021, Pages 406-422.

<sup>18</sup> Ahmed Amal Mohamed, “Power Sharing and its Impact on Political Transition in Sudan,” *Journal of the Faculty of Politics and Economics*, (Beni Suef University, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> [The most prominent armed movements in Sudan and the most important agreements made with them | Encyclopedia](#), Al Jazeera Net, 03/03/2024.

in the Constitutional Declaration.<sup>20</sup>

As a result of these early divisions – predating the inclusion of the Juba Agreement signatories – and the executive branch's leniency toward the Sovereign Council's assumption of powers not granted by the Constitutional Declaration, the military component expanded its influence and began playing increasingly political roles. One example was the unannounced meeting between Sovereign Council head Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on February 3, 2020, in Entebbe, Uganda – despite foreign policy being the exclusive domain of the Cabinet, according to the Constitutional Declaration. Similarly, Hemedti led the government's delegation in peace talks with armed movements, though this was stipulated as the Prime Minister's responsibility.

During the same period, tensions between civilians and the military escalated. These culminated in late September 2021 following a failed coup attempt, after which Hemedti frequently criticized the civilian government and accused it of breaching the Constitutional Declaration. Likewise, Army Chief of Staff Mohamed Osman al-Hussein criticized civilian calls for security sector reform, saying: "They're waving this as if it were the shirt of Uthman. It's just a pretext – they forget that these institutions already

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20 The institutions of the transitional period, according to the constitutional document, consist of "an honorary sovereignty council that will be the head of state and a symbol of national sovereignty, a cabinet that will have the supreme executive authority in the country with a prime minister who will have the powers of the former president, a legislative body that will have the authority to legislate and monitor the government's performance, an independent judiciary, and the formal regular forces: The Armed Forces is a national institution that protects the homeland and its sovereignty and is subject to the decisions of the sovereign and executive authority in accordance with the law, the police forces and security agencies to maintain security and safety of the community and is subject to the policies and decisions of the sovereign and executive authority in accordance with the law, the national public civil service that manages the state apparatus and its functions by implementing the plans and programs of the executive authority in accordance with the law, independent specialized commissions assigned tasks in accordance with their respective establishment laws." But the Transitional Legislative Council was not formed, creating a major void in the transitional period. For more, see Ahmed Amal, "The Transitional Constitutional Document in Sudan. Textual Problems and Contextual Transformations", Egyptian Center for Thought and Strategic Studies, 11/05/2019: <https://ecss.com.eg/5352/>

reform themselves annually."<sup>21</sup> About a month before the 25 October 2021 coup, former Sovereign Council member Mohamed al-Faki stated in a televised interview that the civilian leadership had "sacrificed its political capital by agreeing to share power with the military council, which bore political responsibility for the dispersal of the sit-in, as it was the ruling authority at the time." Hemedti responded sharply to saying: "To those who say they paid a political price, we say, who even knew you? We're the ones who gave you power."<sup>22</sup> Hemedti continued his remarks by declaring that they would not sit with those civilian leaders again, except through consensus.

The polarization within the FFC continued, leading to its split into two blocs: The Central Council and the National Consensus Group. The latter included two of the armed movements that signed the Juba Peace Agreement. The National Consensus Group accused the Central Council of monopolizing power and hijacking the transitional period, prompting it to organize a sit-in in front of the presidential palace.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, in mid-September, a group of protesters led by Mohamed al-Amin Turk shut down Sudan's main port in Port Sudan, to protest the Eastern track in the Juba Agreement, arguing that the components representing Eastern Sudan in the agreement did not represent them. The closure of the port continued until after the October 2021 coup.<sup>24</sup> Hemedti stated during the graduation ceremony of a group of his forces, "The country is collapsing on the political, social, and economic levels... We said our words, we were targeted and ostracized when we told them we would not allow chaos."<sup>25</sup>

Considering this escalating situation, former Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok formed a mechanism to broaden the base of the transition. In a televised

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21 [Hemedti continues to criticize the civilian authority and threatens to leak meeting minutes](#), Sudan Tribune, 28/09/2021

22 Sudan Tribune, op. cit.

23 [The palace sit-in prolongs the crisis of the transitional partnership in Sudan](#), Independent Arabic, 10/24/2021.

24 [The continued closure of Port Sudan port forces traders to resort to Egypt](#), Al-Arabiya 10/13/2021

25 Haj Ali. Hassan, "A Turbulent Transition Period: Transformations of the Hybrid Alliance in Sudan," Omran Magazine, No. 47, Vol. 12 (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2024), pp. 7-32.

speech, he explained that he developed a road map to resolve the current crisis based on his discussions with the concerned parties. He added that the entry point for implementing this map is the immediate cessation of all forms of escalation between all parties, the return of work in the institutions of the transitional period, and that differences should be managed outside them, and an agreement that issues of terrorism and security threats should not be subject to bargaining, bidding or tensions as they are issues of national security.<sup>26</sup> However, this mechanism, which included a wide spectrum of political actors, failed to achieve its goals.

Polarization reached its peak with the 25 October 2021 coup, when Sudanese army commander Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan declared a state of emergency and dissolved both the Sovereignty Council and the Cabinet led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok – excluding the Juba Peace Agreement ministers, who had aligned themselves with the military before the coup. Simultaneously, security forces arrested several ministers, Sovereignty Council members, and political activists, and the Prime Minister was taken to an undisclosed location, according to a statement issued by the Prime Minister's Office.<sup>27</sup>

One of the most notable features of this phase is that the power-sharing arrangements approved by the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA), while not intended to promote totalitarianism, ended up contributing to creating more tensions, divisions, and political maneuvering within the FFC coalition, which was already suffering from escalating disagreements since the beginning of the transitional period. The JPA reshaped the political dynamics at that stage to the detriment of the FFC coalition's power and influence, favoring the military component, especially with the alignment of several armed movements that signed the agreement with the military.

These power struggles were prioritized instead of focusing on building the institutions of the transitional period and addressing the structural and institutional obstacles that stood in the way of implementing the Juba Agreement and the constitutional document in general. As a result, the focus on securing control

over resources and positions prevailed, which resulted in the weakening of the effectiveness of state institutions and opened the way for a large vacuum that the military took advantage of, as explained in the previous narrative. This state of political instability ultimately contributed to the October 2021 coup, with the JPA becoming a tool that helped strengthen dictatorial power structures and the reversal of the democratic process, allying with the military to preserve the gains of the “elite deal” and excluding others as a strategy to maximize gains.

Hamdok and the cabinet's relinquishment of a number of roles stipulated in the constitutional document in favor of the military leaders represented by Burhan and Hemedti also contributed to their ability to move away from honorary sovereign roles toward direct executive roles that enabled them to continue creating a network of relations with political parties, civil society, and armed movements, including foreign relations independent of the executive authority.

This phase was also characterized by the emergence of signs of competition within the camp of the military component itself in an effort to gain support. This rivalry emerged clearly when Hemedti, then head of the government delegation to the Juba peace negotiations, sought to build an alliance with the armed movements, secretly asking them to form an alliance against what he called the “Galaba”,<sup>28</sup> a plot that was revealed by representatives of the armed movements to the UN Panel of Experts.<sup>29</sup>

This moment marked a pivotal step in Hemedti's efforts to forge local alliances by capitalizing on longstanding grievances and historical narratives between armed movements and the state. His aim was to bolster his power in the face of the Sudanese army's dominance – a strategy that became even more explicit and sustained following the 25 October coup, as will be further illustrated.

<sup>26</sup> [He said that the conflict is not between the military and civilians, Hamdok presents a map to end Sudan's crisis](#), Al Jazeera Net, 10/15/2021.

<sup>27</sup> [The coup in Sudan: Abdel Fattah al-Burhan dissolves the Sovereignty and Ministers Councils and declares a state of emergency](#), BBC Arabic, on 10/25/2021.

<sup>28</sup> The term was once used to describe the merchants, particularly slave merchant class from northern Sudan and is now used to describe the Sudanese elites with origins from Sudan's Northern areas.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted from: Hassan Haj Ali, *Turbulent Transition: Transformations of the Hybrid Alliance in Sudan*, Omran Magazine, No. 47, Vol. 12 (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2024), p. 17.

## 2.2. The 25 October Coup: The Emergence of Disputes Between Security Factions and Mobilization

After the Central Council faction of the FFC was pushed out of the political scene and a vacuum was created in the wake of the 25 October coup, which disrupted the transitional arrangements, conflicting interests between the military factions began to surface. A growing number of signs pointed to mounting rivalries and disputes between the leadership of the SAF and the RSF, increasingly portraying them as two isolated and competing centers of power.

One notable sign was Hemedti's visit to Addis Ababa, which took place shortly after the SAF reclaimed the disputed Al-Fashaga border region from militias reportedly backed by the Ethiopian government.<sup>30</sup> This move was accompanied by an escalation in official rhetoric, further straining Sudan's already fragile relations with Ethiopia.

Simultaneously, Hemedti launched efforts to reposition himself on the international stage. He sought to reassure global actors by pledging commitment to Sudan's democratic transition,<sup>31</sup> while also leveraging the RSF's role in border control to pressure Western powers. He warned that a failure to support the Sudanese government could lead to a surge in refugee flows toward Europe. These messages were paired with alarming claims about dormant terrorist cells in Sudan,<sup>32</sup> statements seemingly aimed at amplifying international concerns.

In parallel, Hemedti intensified his outreach to regional powers. In 2022 alone, he visited Chad four times,<sup>33</sup> followed by a controversial visit in early 2023, just hours after General Al-Burhan's own trip to N'Djamena, highlighting the depth of competition

between the two military leaders.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps most striking was Hemedti's covert visit to Russia,<sup>35</sup> where he met with senior security officials to discuss expanding military cooperation. He publicly declared his openness to hosting Russian military bases in Sudan, signaling a bold attempt to secure alternative international alliances, stating, "We have no issue with the establishment of Russian military bases in Sudan."<sup>36</sup>

However, these visits and statements have reinforced Hemedti's image as an isolated leader whose foreign policy and positions are separate and independent from the state apparatus. This contributed to deepening the divide between him and the military establishment and increased fears within the fragile coalition formed to govern the country after the 25 October coup. Following these developments, reports also emerged of disagreements and tensions between Hemedti and Sovereignty Council members and SAF General Shams al-Din Kabashi.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, during March 2022, Hemedti's visits were followed by a series of trips by Al-Burhan to several countries, most notably Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, South Sudan, Uganda, and Egypt.<sup>38</sup> Al-Burhan reportedly expressed to Cairo his concerns about a potential coup by Hemedti, aided by foreign actors, especially in light of Hemedti's growing international engagements, including visits to Russia and the UAE.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, Al-Burhan sought to expand his own network of international and regional allies, notably hosting Israel's foreign minister in February 2023.<sup>40</sup>

30 [Hemedti and Kobashi dispute. Who is behind setting the fire?](#) Al-Rakoba Newspaper, 04/02/2022.

31 [Sudan: Hemedti emphasizes the need to complete the democratic transition](#), Al-Arabiya Net, 05/01/2022.

32 ["If we open the border"... Hemedti threatens the painful scenario](#), Alhurra, 01/12/2021.

33 [What is behind the visits of Al-Burhan and his deputy to Chad?](#) Independent Arabic, 02/02/2023.

34 [Separated by hours... What is the secret of Al-Burhan and Hemedti's double visit to Chad?](#) Al Jazeera Net, 01/31/2023.

35 [The rejection by most political forces of the consequences of his visit to Moscow increases Hemedti's internal isolation](#), Al-Quds Al-Arabi, 02/25/2022.

36 [Hemedti: We have no issue with the establishment of Russian military bases in Sudan](#), Syria TV, 03/03/2022.

37 [Hemedti and Kobashi's differences... Will it burn the palace?](#) Al-Rakoba Newspaper, 03/02/2022.

38 [Al-Burhan begins a visit to Egypt in the fifth foreign stop in a month](#), Al Ain Al Akhbaria, 03/30/2022.

39 [Al-Burhan informs Cairo of his fear of a coup arranged by Hemedti and foreign parties](#), Sudanile, 02/24/2022.

40 [Al-Burhan and Israel's Foreign Minister discuss secu-](#)

## 11 Escalation Pathways to the April War and the Dynamics of Sudan's Political Economy

These tensions and undeclared maneuvers became more visible in the divergence of speeches and positions on the 2021 coup between the two generals, as Hemedti stated in a television interview broadcast on Monday, 1 August 2022, when asked if the army leaders “regret” the step they call a “course correction”, and what others call a “coup”, Hemedti said: “Unfortunately, we didn’t succeed in the change, for reasons I won’t talk about now. When you think about change, you have a goal and a vision for change. But unfortunately, the thing that was planned was not done, and it failed. And now we’ve gone downhill.”<sup>41</sup> The RSF commander went on to say that the coup was wrong. “What happened on 25 October was a mistake,” Burhan replied “but when we took this step, we were fully convinced of its necessity and importance,” stressing that these measures contributed to enhancing political participation during the transitional period.

On the domestic front, Hemedti intensified his efforts to build alliances and consolidate support from various groups. He conducted visits to several regions across Sudan and notably intervened to mediate the dispute surrounding the closure of Port Sudan<sup>42</sup> by the Beja Council of Chiefs, who were protesting the Eastern track of the JPA, which preceded the October 2021 coup. In 2022, Hemedti also visited several localities in Darfur. The stated goals of the visits varied, as they included the establishment of reconciliation treaties between the warring tribes in Darfur and the establishment of a joint force to implement the agreements.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the conclusion of the reconciliation agreements, Hemedti did not return to Khartoum and stayed in El Geneina, West Darfur. Officially, the reason for this was to contribute to social reconciliation and prevent civil conflicts from spreading. However, this decision raised other questions about its goals. Several analysts suggested that his stay might have been related to the escalation of tensions between his forces and the Sudanese army, as well as between him

and Al-Burhan.<sup>44</sup> He also announced his intention to sit down with the armed movements that signed the JPA to agree on the progress of its implementation<sup>45</sup> This move was seen as another attempt to woo the armed movements.

Hemedti also sought to win the loyalty of the police forces by delivering a briefing to police officers and announcing the payment of an additional month’s salary for them.<sup>46</sup> In 2023, three months before the outbreak of war, Hemedti visited Kassala and held a meeting with the state security committee to review the security situation after the events of tribal violence in the state.<sup>47</sup> These visits and movements can be seen as political maneuvers aimed at gaining tribal and civilian loyalties and winning the support of various parties.

After the coup, a series of negotiation attempts and escalation between the RSF and the Islamists also began. Hemedti met with the leader of the Islamic Movement, Ali Karti, in August 2022, according to reports, Karti who is a leader in the National Congress Party (NCP) and the Islamist movement, threatened Hemedti and assured him of their presence within the army and even within the RSF. This escalation culminated in February 2023, when Hemedti openly and explicitly accused the Islamists of attempting to create a rift between the army and the RSF.

The political polarization and rhetorical exchanges between the army and the RSF continued to escalate. One of the key episodes of this rising political tension was the indirect exchanges between the two generals over the security situation in the Central African Republic. In December 2022, Hemedti announced that a plot to overthrow the government in the Central African Republic backed by parties inside Sudan had been foiled. He confirmed the arrest of retired military personnel and armed groups that

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[rity cooperation](#), Al Sharq News, 02/02/2023.

41 [Hemedti to BBC: The army has failed to correct the course and Sudan is going downhill](#), BBC Arabic, 01/08/2022.

42 [Port Sudan port closure plan suspended in response to Hemedti](#), Al Jazeera Net, 04/12/2021.

43 [Hemedti in Darfur to polish his image and convince Arab tribes to stop violence](#), Sudane Tribune, 26/066/2022.

44 [He won't be returning to Khartoum anytime soon What are the implications of Hemedti's stay in Darfur](#), Al-Watan News, 06/23/2022.

45 [Hemedti announces his intention to sit down with all parties in Juba to review the implementation of the peace agreement](#), Sputnik Arabia, 02/16/2022.

46 [Hemedti gives a briefing to police officers from the rank of Brigadier General and above](#), Al-Tabia Net, 10/22/2022.

47 [Hemedti holds a meeting with the Kassala Security Committee and listens to a detailed report on the security situation](#)News, Sudan, 22/01/2023.

had been trained for this purpose.

Al-Burhan implicitly responded to this claim during his visit to the Blue Nile region in January 2023, where he stated, “The Sudanese army has never recruited mercenaries to fight in another country,” adding, “We are a professional and regular army that respects international systems and laws, and we will not destabilize any state.”

These statements were followed by separate visits of Al-Burhan and Hemedti to Chad in early 2023, just a few months before the war broke out. These back-to-back visits, separated by only a few hours, highlighted the division and separate movements between the army and the RSF, especially considering conflicting narratives about the objectives of the visits. Analysts believe that Al-Burhan's visit was about strengthening border security with Chad, particularly given reports that the RSF had cooperated with Wagner and the Chadian opposition to change the regime in Chad. This may have prompted Hemedti to provide reassurances to the Chadian government.<sup>48</sup>

## 2.3. The Framework Agreement and the Failure of the Bargaining Track

More than a year after the 25 October coup, the political crisis deepened, divisions between the army and the RSF became more pronounced, and the constitutional vacuum left by the coup persisted. Meanwhile, the economic crisis worsened after international financial institutions suspended their aid and conditioned its resumption on the restoration of civilian rule. Amid this turmoil, signs of a new political agreement began to emerge, aiming to end the state of the coup and return to the civilian political path. This took place under regional and international mediation represented by the “tripartite and quadripartite” mechanism.<sup>49</sup> At a

<sup>48</sup> [Hours. What is the secret of Al-Burhan and Hemedti's double visit to Chad?](#) Al Jazeera Net, op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> The parties to the tripartite mechanism in Sudan were the United Nations, the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority for Central and East African Development (IGAD). This mechanism originally emerged after the resignation of Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok in early 2022 and was formed to mediate the resolution of the political crisis that erupted after the October 25 coup and its repercussions, while the quadripartite mechanism includes the

time when the steering committee of the Sudanese Bar Association drafted a proposal for a transitional constitution aimed primarily at reaching a political agreement to form civilian governance structures.

On 5 December 2022, a Framework Agreement was signed between the leaders of the army and the RSF on the one hand and the civilian forces that included the Freedom and Change Central Council and some other civilian forces on the other.<sup>50</sup>

One of the key provisions of the Framework Agreement was the commitment to transfer transitional authority to a fully civilian government, with no participation from the regular armed forces. The agreement also called for the establishment of a limited civilian sovereign body with ceremonial functions and emphasized the need for the military to step back from political engagement.

Additionally, the agreement stressed the integration of the RSF and armed movements into the Sudanese army, following arrangements to be determined later by the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Commission. This integration was part of a broader plan for security and military reform aimed at creating a unified, professional national army. The agreement also reaffirmed the parties' commitment to implementing the JPA.

Although the agreement received support from regional and international communities, it sparked considerable controversy among various political forces within Sudan. Opinions on the agreement were deeply divided. The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party expressed reservations, while the Communist Party outright rejected it. A large segment of the Resistance Committees also opposed the agreement, arguing that it contradicted the “Three Nos” (No Negotiation, No Partnership, No Legitimacy) that had become a slogan of their movement following the coup.<sup>51</sup> For their part, the Islamists, represented by various factions within the Broad Islamic Movement, publicly

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UAE, Saudi Arabia, Britain, and the United States.

<sup>50</sup> [To expand on the Framework Agreement](#), Al Jazeera.net, published on 27/03/2023.

<sup>51</sup> The Three No's is a slogan adopted by a wide range of resistance committees after the October 25 military coup, calling for no negotiations, participation and legitimacy with those who carried out the coup and calling for their overthrow through continued peaceful protests and political resistance.

declared their absolute rejection of the agreement. Furthermore, many of their leaders went as far as threatening to wage war against the agreement and actively resisted its implementation.<sup>52</sup> This came after members of the dissolved NCP managed to re-enter positions of power following the 25 October coup, as Al-Burhan sought the support of several figures from the Al-Bashir regime. For example, Al-Burhan dismissed the Director of the National Security Service and the Director of Military Intelligence, appointing Major General Mohamed Subair as the new Director of Military Intelligence. He also appointed Lieutenant General Ahmed Al-Mufadal – who had served as the head of the NCP in South Kordofan until its dissolution – as the Director of the General Intelligence Service.<sup>53</sup>

Rejection of the Framework Agreement continued among figures associated with the dissolved Islamist regime. This opposition was evident in statements made by several prominent leaders linked to the Al-Bashir government.

Former Interior Minister under Al-Bashir, Ibrahim Mahmoud Hamed, called on their followers across all states, localities, and sectors to “prepare for confrontation” if the Framework Agreement was announced. Similarly, al-Haj Adam threatened war if the agreement proceeded with their exclusion, stating, “Either we go to elections or to the battlefield, and they must take this country to its limits.” Adding to this, Naji Abdullah, the leader of the “Dababin” (Militia)<sup>54</sup> swore that the Framework Agreement would only continue over their dead bodies.

For the signatories to the Framework Agreement, and specifically, the military component, within which the conflict and division had become clear, the main causes of disagreement between the Sudanese army and the RSF in this agreement centered on the issues of military reform and integration.

For the parties that signed the Framework Agreement – specifically, the military component, which by that time was visibly fractured – the primary points of contention between the SAF and the RSF centered on

<sup>52</sup> [Sudan... What is the Framework Agreement and who supports and rejects it?](#) Sky News, 15/05/2022.

<sup>53</sup> [Sudan... Are the Islamists returning to power through Burhan's gate?](#) Al Jazeera Net, 30/11/2021.

<sup>54</sup> Dababin: One of the paramilitary support battalions of the Islamic Movement in Sudan.

issues of military reform and integration. It appeared that both military factions signed the agreement with the aim of securing the greatest possible gains from the final agreement that would follow the Framework Agreement. This was seen as a maneuvering tactic amid heightened tensions. The SAF sought to integrate the RSF as quickly as possible, while the RSF aimed to preserve its autonomy through a gradual and distant integration process that would maintain its privileges. Both sides put forward divergent visions regarding military integration and reform.<sup>55</sup> The disagreement extended to the timeline for the integration process, with significant differences over the number of years required to complete it. There was also a dispute over the chain of command for the RSF during the transitional period. The SAF proposed that the RSF should be under the command of the army, while the RSF insisted that both the SAF and the RSF publicly committed to the ceasefire, but each conditioned respect on the other's compliance.

These disagreements were not merely technical issues; they reflected deep-rooted fears between the two factions. Each side was concerned about the other's potential expansion, driven by calculations of power, access to resources, and regional and international alliances. These rivalries, as outlined in the escalation timeline, became increasingly apparent as both sides maneuvered for strategic advantage.

## 2.4. Violence as a Strategy and the Failure of De-escalation Attempts

After the failure of political maneuvering and alignments by both SAF and RSF to manage power – culminating in the collapse of the Framework Agreement,<sup>56</sup> violence emerged as a zero-sum strategy to continue the conflict through alternative means. Both sides abandoned political solutions in favor of military escalation, marking a decisive shift toward

<sup>55</sup> The disagreement was over the period for integrating the RSF, with the military saying no more than two years and the RSF proposing 10 years: <https://2u.pw/bme8y9AX>

<sup>56</sup> The failure of the Framework Agreement is a case study in the failure of bargaining in the context of avoiding escalation and military conflict. It shows how deep political and power divisions related to the preservation of resources and power, especially among military forces with conflicting interests, can thwart compromise efforts and incentivize military solutions and options to manage these conflicts.

armed confrontation.

On the morning of 12 April, units from the RSF moved to Merowe Military Airport without prior notification or coordination with the SAF leadership. In response, the army, led by Chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, accused the RSF of mobilizing, deploying, and moving within the capital Khartoum, and several other cities without the approval of military leadership.

In its official statement, the SAF declared, “The movements of the RSF within the capital and other states are violations of their designated roles and operational framework.” The statement warned that the country was at what it described as a “dangerous turning point,” cautioning that the RSF’s movements would lead to increased tensions and threaten national security. The army demanded that the RSF withdraw from its positions near Merowe Military Airport, threatening to “force the forces to withdraw if they do not comply with the demands of the armed forces.”

In contrast, the RSF’s spokesperson’s office issued a statement asserting that “the RSF is a national force operating within the framework of the law, in coordination and harmony with the leadership of the armed forces and other security forces.” The statement added that the RSF’s presence in the Northern State and in the city of Merowe was part of its broader deployment across other states, “as part of its duties and responsibilities that extend all the way to the desert.”<sup>57</sup>

Despite the absence of signs of de-escalation, a statement signed by Malik Agar, Minni Arko Minawi, Jibril Ibrahim, Mohamed Issa Aliyu, and Abdullah Massar – leaders of several armed movements and political organizations – was issued on 14 April. The statement explained that the Commander of the RSF had affirmed his commitment to avoiding escalation and expressed his willingness to meet with the Chairman of the Sovereignty Council, General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan.<sup>58</sup>

The first shot was fired on 15 April 2023, and both

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<sup>57</sup> [Amid looming confrontation, Rapid Support Forces arrive in Khartoum, the Sudanese army deploys its soldiers, and warns of a dangerous turn](#), Al Jazeera Net, 13/04/2023.

<sup>58</sup> [Hemedti pledges not to escalate He is ready to meet with Al-Burhan](#), Sky News Arabia, 14/04/2023.

the army and the RSF exchanged accusations, as the RSF stated in a statement on the X platform that “the army forces attacked us with a sweeping attack with all kinds of heavy and light weapons.” Hemedti stated that the army surrounded their headquarters, forcing them to respond, and indicated that they would continue to fight and that there would be no dialogue before the Sudanese army retreated.<sup>59</sup> In its statement, the army accused the RSF of attacking its headquarters, declaring, “Continuing its march of treachery and betrayal, the RSF tried to attack our forces in the sports city and other locations, and our armed forces confronted them.” Al-Burhan stated that he was surprised by the RSF attack on his house on Saturday morning, asserting that the RSF were unable to enter the army headquarters and that all strategic locations remained under military control.<sup>60</sup>

The army announced that the RSF were targeting army personnel and seeking to seize power and considered them to be rebel forces. The army’s chief of staff stressed that there would be no dialogue or negotiations until the RSF’s “lawlessness” was ended. Al-Burhan stated that the military had no choice but to confront the rebels’ ambitions for power.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, the zero-sum rhetoric emerged in the early days of the war, emphasizing the desire and perceived capability of both sides to eliminate the other. In their speeches, both parties described the conflict in terms of “betrayal” and declared that there would be “no retreat before decisive victory.” Hemedti repeatedly used phrases during that period such as, “Al-Burhan must surrender before our besieging forces reach the command headquarters.”<sup>62</sup> Similarly, statements suggesting the ability to swiftly resolve the conflict were frequently repeated by Sudanese army leaders and the official spokesperson of the armed forces, with expressions like “the hour of victory is approaching.”

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<sup>59</sup> [Hemedti: No dialogue before Sudanese army retreats and Egyptian soldiers are being evacuated, Al-Arabiya Net](#), 15/04/2023.

<sup>60</sup> [Abdel Fattah al-Burhan’s first comment on the clashes between the Sudanese army and the “Rapid Support”](#), CNN Arabic, 15/04/2023.

<sup>61</sup> [Sudan Army: Hemedti imposed the war and targeted the armed forces](#), Al-Arabiya Net, 15/04/2023.

<sup>62</sup> [Between Burhan’s promise and Hemedti’s threats... where is Sudan heading?](#) Okaz newspaper, 16/04/2023

On 24 April, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that both parties to the conflict had agreed to a three-day ceasefire. This truce marked the first attempt at de-escalation following the outbreak of military escalation and the commencement of armed operations. Both SAF and RSF declared their commitment to the ceasefire. The SAF stated that it would respect the truce, provided that the RSF also adhered to it.<sup>63</sup>

On 6 May, the Jeddah negotiations began under Saudi American sponsorship, bringing together representatives of the military and the RSF to initiate talks aimed at halting military operations and ending the conflict. Hemedti welcomed the Jeddah talks, while the Sudanese army sent its delegation to participate in the negotiations.<sup>64</sup>

Although multiple ceasefires were agreed on, the parties often used them as tactical pauses to regroup and gain territory. Negotiations between the army and the RSF began about three weeks after the fighting broke out, with the U.S.-Saudi mediation successfully bringing both parties to the table. This resulted in the signing of the Jeddah Agreement on 11 May 2023. Key provisions included commitments to protect civilians, always distinguish between civilians and military personnel, refrain from attacks that could harm civilians, and respect private and public facilities. However, the failure of both sides to adhere to the agreement's terms led to the expansion and intensification of the conflict.<sup>65</sup> The fighting expanded to include the Darfur region, where the RSF made significant gains on the ground. The RSF, along with allied Arab tribal militias, carried out killings and acts of ethnic cleansing in Darfur.<sup>66</sup>

The failure of the first round of negotiations prompted mediators to convene a new round in November 2023, focused on confidence-building measures, including improving each side's official media rhetoric and reducing inflammatory speech.

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<sup>63</sup> [Sudan: Parties to the conflict agree to a 72-hour truce and the evacuation of foreign nationals continues](#), Monte Carlo International, 25/04/2023

<sup>64</sup> [Talks between Sudanese army and RSF begin in Jeddah](#), Al-Masry Al-Youm, 07/05/2023

<sup>65</sup> [Sudan. What is the Jeddah Agreement and why is it so controversial?](#) Sky News Arabia, 08/01/2024.

<sup>66</sup> [A timeline... This is how Sudan's war widened a year later](#), Al Sharq News, 15/04/2024.

However, both parties failed to adhere to the terms of the Jeddah Agreement. Sudanese Foreign Minister Hussein Awad stated at the time, "The agreement obliges the RSF to leave citizens' homes and civilian properties." He further emphasized that "any negotiations should focus on implementing the Jeddah Agreement and compelling the RSF to withdraw from civilian properties, with no discussion of any other issues."<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, Mohamed Mukhtar, an RSF adviser and member of the RSF negotiating delegation, responded that "The Jeddah Declaration did not stipulate that the RSF must leave civilian homes."<sup>68</sup>

Violence continued to escalate despite ongoing international and national initiatives aimed at ending the conflict. Proposals included the IGAD Initiative, the African Union Initiative, and an initiative from Ethiopia, where Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed expressed his "readiness to visit Khartoum and mediate a ceasefire."<sup>69</sup> Additionally, there were initiatives from the Arab League, the Sudan Neighboring Countries Summit held in Cairo, and the Libyan Initiative, as well as negotiations in Geneva and Manama.

The failure of negotiation pathways and the repeated collapse of ceasefires during the April war can be understood through the lens of both parties' belief in the effectiveness of a military solution, using negotiations as a tactical maneuver. The conflicting sides entered talks convinced that they could achieve a military resolution, which weakened the credibility and intentions behind ceasefires and signed agreements, such as the Jeddah Agreement.

Although ceasefires and negotiations were presented as efforts to protect civilians and halt violence, they were often seen by both parties as tactical pauses aimed at gaining military advantages or reorganizing forces, rather than genuine commitments to peace. A clear example of this was the continued advance of the RSF in Darfur during the Jeddah negotiations, as highlighted in the previous narrative. This reflects how negotiations were used more as a strategy to secure temporary gains than to de-escalate military

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<sup>67</sup> [What is behind the Sudanese army's request to implement the Jeddah Agreement?](#) BBC Arabic 19/08/2024.

<sup>68</sup> Sudan... What is the Jeddah Agreement and why is it so controversial? Sky News Arabia, op. cit.

<sup>69</sup> [Ethiopian Prime Minister announces his desire to mediate between the Sudanese army and the RSF](#), Bawabat Al-Shorouk 17/07/2023.

tensions.

Moreover, the multiplicity of regional and international initiatives – such as the Saudi American initiative, African Union and IGAD initiatives, as well as the Geneva and secret Manama negotiations – revealed a fragile state of competition and a lack of unified international and regional efforts to end the war. This disunity weakened the effectiveness of these initiatives. Additionally, there were challenges related to regional intersections and interests that undermined some of these efforts. For instance, the IGAD initiative was accused by the Sudan Sovereignty Council, led by Al-Burhan, of being influenced by certain countries within IGAD that are aligned with regional powers accused of supporting one of the conflict parties. This sentiment was evident in the Sovereignty Council's statement labeling Kenya as a “non-neutral party.”<sup>70</sup>

Following the failure of de-escalation efforts, the armed conflict expanded to include the states of Al-Jazirah, Sennar, Blue Nile, Kordofan, Darfur, and the borders of Gedaref and White Nile. The tactics of warfare also intensified, with the RSF employing heavy artillery shelling and drones to attack cities and neighborhoods outside its control or those it was losing, such as Omdurman, Halfaya, El Fasher, Atbara, and Shendi. Meanwhile, the SAF used the air force to target areas beyond its control.

As violence escalated amid rising international and regional tensions and the intersection of interests in the conflict, Sudan's Ministry of Defense stated following the RSF's heavy use of military drones – that “the UAE provided the militia with drones launched from an airport inside Chad, and Sudan reserves the right to respond.”<sup>71</sup> This statement marked a significant shift in the official political discourse concerning the war, particularly at the international level hinting at the potential extension of military conflict beyond Sudan's borders. Official and unofficial political statements from members of the Sovereignty Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Sudan's representative to the United Nations Security Council repeatedly accused the United Arab Emirates of “providing logistical support to the RSF,” asserting that “Sudan possesses evidence of this

<sup>70</sup> [Why Sudan rejects Kenya's chairmanship of IGAD](#), Al Jazeera Net, 16/06/2023.

<sup>71</sup> [Sudan: UAE provided advanced vehicles to the RSF, and we reserve the right to respond](#), Sudan Tribune, 12/02/2024.

support.”<sup>72</sup>

On the other hand, the RSF commander accused Egypt of participating in the war and attacking his forces with the Egyptian air force.<sup>73</sup>

## **2.5. What Is Behind the Persistence of Violence as an Option and the Dynamics It Has Spawned?**

The trajectory of the military conflict continued to escalate and intensify during the ongoing war, driven by underlying factors related to the power struggle and competition previously mentioned. In addition, the continuation of the war led to the emergence of new dimensions and triggers that contributed to the complexity of the conflict. These factors can be explored by analyzing the composition of the warring parties, the dynamics they fostered, and how they have contributed to the prolongation of the conflict.

Over time, some of these factors that emerged during the war transformed into major drivers of its continuation, surpassing the original motivations that led the parties to resort to violence at the beginning of the conflict.

Several incentives drove the RSF's decision to escalate and prolong the war. Chief among them was external backing, which both enabled and funded their continued military campaign. External influence played a decisive role in the December Revolution through the Framework Agreement negotiations, which were backed by various regional and international actors.<sup>74</sup> This dynamic became evident after the outbreak of the war, reflecting the

<sup>72</sup> [After Security Council spat... Anwar Gargash comments on what Sudan's delegate said about the UAE](#), CNN Arabic, 19/06/2024.

<sup>73</sup> [Hemedti accuses Egypt of launching airstrikes on his forces in Sudan](#), Al Jazeera Net, 09/10/2024.

<sup>74</sup> International parties, namely the United States and Britain, and regional parties, namely Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the African Union, were heavily represented in most stages of the transitional period and its agreement.

## 17 Escalation Pathways to the April War and the Dynamics of Sudan's Political Economy

interests and intersecting agendas of both local and international actors. In this context, numerous reports emerged highlighting the role played by the United Arab Emirates in supporting the RSF, including providing logistical, military, and political backing.

The Wall Street Journal published a report stating that the UAE had supplied weapons to the RSF under the guise of humanitarian aid and that the shipments were being transported through Amdjarass Airport near the Sudan-Chad border. The report further noted that Washington was aware of these arms shipments and had previously communicated its concerns to Abu Dhabi.<sup>75</sup>

The UN Panel of Experts final report presented in paragraph 2 of resolution 2676 (2023), issued on 15 January 2024. According to the information collected by the UN Panel from sources in Chad and Darfur about allegations of UAE support for the RSF, these allegations were deemed credible, and the report states: "This new firepower has had a tremendous impact on the balance of power on the ground both in Darfur and in other regions."<sup>76</sup>

The external dimension was followed by several key indications, the most notable of which came from the official in charge of the East Sudan file and civil society organizations within the Advisory Council of the RSF, who had defected. He stated that the main reason behind the outbreak of the war was Hemedti's efforts to gain control over Sudan's Red Sea coastline on behalf of foreign countries, through proposed projects that included the construction of airports, three ports, and six military camps, including naval training facilities aimed at deploying 30,000 fighters along the coast. The Sudanese army reportedly rejected these plans, considering them a threat to national sovereignty, which accelerated the confrontation between the RSF and the army. He added that Hemedti's ambitions to seize power were driven by an agenda aligned with the interests of foreign states.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> [Wall Street Journal: UAE sent weapons to RSF instead of aid to Sudanese](#), Al Jazeera Net, 10/08/2023.

<sup>76</sup> Final report of the UN Panel of Experts submitted in paragraph 2 of resolution 2676 (2023), issued on January 15, 2024, available at: [n2400562.pdf](#).

<sup>77</sup> [Details of the defection of advisors from the Rapid Support and their alignment with the Sudanese army](#), Al Jazeera Net, 26/10/2024.

In addition to external support, the RSF's control over key trade routes and strategic areas has significantly contributed to sustaining its logistical supply lines for the conflict. From the start of the war until January 2025, the RSF maintained control over the Al-Jaily oil refinery, one of the country's most vital fuel infrastructure facilities, until it was recaptured by the army during recent developments. The RSF also dominated major trade routes, particularly across Darfur states, and imposed a ban on the export of goods<sup>78</sup> from areas under its control to Egypt, citing Egypt's alleged support for the Sudanese army, as well as to other regions under army control.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, its control over large parts of gold-rich Darfur has enabled the continued production and smuggling of gold, directly under RSF's supervision, as numerous reports have indicated.<sup>80</sup>

At the level of RSF fighters and mobilized recruits, looting and pillaging have emerged as new incentives driving their participation and continued engagement in the conflict. While the RSF often publishes videos and official statements claiming to protect civilians and provide them with food and services, the reality on the ground tells a different story. According to a Reuters report, residents stated that "the RSF relies heavily on irregular fighters, many of whom are motivated primarily by money and looting, and that the group often struggles to maintain control over these elements."<sup>81</sup>

Meanwhile, and through its de facto government, the Sudanese army has transformed the formal economy under its control into a war economy.<sup>82</sup> With policies that had significant repercussions because of the war.

<sup>78</sup> Economic issues – like currency changes and trade route blockages – have become politicized tools in the conflict

<sup>79</sup> [Among them are beans and oil... Rapid Support prevents the export of 12 commodities to Egypt, website](#), Al-Arabiya 10/16/2024.

<sup>80</sup> [Bloody gold looting continues after the war](#), Al-Taghyir newspaper, 17/12/2014.

<sup>81</sup> [Up close: RSF fighters wreak havoc in the heart of Sudan's agricultural areas](#), Swissinfo, 09/08/2024.

<sup>82</sup> The term war economy refers to a situation in which the system of production, mobilization, and allocation of resources becomes focused on supporting the war effort. Measures such as increasing tax rates, levies, and building supportive international alliances are used to finance the conflict in a variety of ways.

Domestic output has contracted due to disrupted trade routes, increased transportation and shipping costs, and complications in import/export operations caused by price volatility and bureaucratic hurdles. The loss of large productive areas further deepened the economic crisis. At the same time, the army faced mounting logistical costs for the war effort, financed through state resources – exacerbating fiscal pressure. These combined factors contributed to rising inflation, and worsening living conditions across the country. In addition to its grip on the formal economy, the army has also benefited from foreign backing. A key example is the restoration of ties with Iran, which reportedly enabled the Sudanese army to acquire Iranian-made drones, according to a U.S. State Department report.<sup>83</sup>

In parallel, the war also gave rise to new dynamics, most notably ethnic and regional ones. During the conflict, the identity and narrative surrounding the RSF underwent a significant shift. Initially formed by the former regime as a brutal counterinsurgency force against Darfur's rebel groups, whose discourses centered on structural marginalization along ethnic and regional lines, the RSF has since adopted a radically different rhetoric.

Amid the ongoing war, RSF leaders and advisers began to frame their struggle through the lens of “center vs. periphery,” invoking ideological and regional narratives to justify the conflict. This is evident in both official and unofficial discourse, where RSF figures have referred to the war as a “Revolution of the Periphery,” a fight to “bring democracy,” “dismantle the 1956 state,” “eliminate the Islamist army,” and “overthrow the Islamist regime.”<sup>84</sup>

Since the beginning of the war, the RSF actively sought to recruit members of Arab tribes in Darfur, leveraging a narrative that framed the conflict as being directed against specific ethnic groups. This strategy was highlighted in the final report of the UN Panel of Experts, issued on 15 January 2024.<sup>85</sup> Building on this ethnic narrative, Hemedti's statement attacking Sovereign Council member Ibrahim Jaber can be seen

as part of this broader ethnic framing of the conflict. He criticized Jaber for not siding with him, claiming – as per Hemedti's own words – that Jaber “did not respect the blood ties,” referring to their shared tribal lineage, nor did he acknowledge the favors Hemedti had allegedly done for him. Hemedti went further, attacking the Shaigiya tribe, portraying it as the main driving force behind the Islamist movement, which he accused of orchestrating the war.<sup>86</sup>

As the war expanded across Darfur and various armed movements joined the conflict alongside the army, the fighting took on a more complex ethnic and regional dimension – rooted in longstanding local tensions. With the war spreading to most Sudanese states and amid the grave violations committed by the RSF, the conflict evolved into one with broader popular mobilization. Volunteer-based resistance groups began to form in support of the army, and Islamist factions seized this opportunity, investing heavily in these dynamics and mobilizing supportive rhetoric to align the resistance with their own agendas.<sup>87</sup> These ethnic narratives helped solidify alignment and counter-alignment on both sides.

As for the Islamic Movement and the dissolved NCP, their incentives to prolong the armed conflict and embrace a zero-sum trajectory are closely tied to the gains they have accrued from the war. The conflict has helped solidify a political reality that favors them, especially after the significant threat posed by the Framework Agreement – which aimed to exclude remnants of the former regime – was neutralized. Following the October 25 coup, these actors re-emerged on the political scene, as previously noted. The war further expanded their gains, including the release of key leaders from prison and the return of disbanded Islamist-linked military units to the field, such as (Hayaat Alamaliyat) of the General Intelligence Service. This unit had been dissolved as part of restructuring efforts, but in a televised interview on Sudan TV following its mutiny during the dissolution process, Al-Burhan remarked that the unit was established under the patronage of Salah Gosh, suggesting its original purpose might have been to replace the army given the extent of weaponry it possessed.<sup>88</sup> In addition to the return

<sup>83</sup> [A US State Department report reveals the UAE's support for the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese army's purchase of drones from Iran](#), Al-Arabiya, 16/10/2024.

<sup>84</sup> [Rapid Support: Statement on the anniversary of the December Revolution](#), Rhino Agency, 19/12/2024.

<sup>85</sup> U.S. State Department report shows UAE support for RSF, op. cit.

<sup>86</sup> [A speech marred by contradictions RSF commander opens fire in all directions](#), Al Jazeera Net, 10/10/2024.

<sup>87</sup> [Sudan Tribune, Sudan Tribune](#), 28/3/2024.

<sup>88</sup> TV interview on “Sudan Channel”, General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, presented by Shawki Abdel Azim, link to

of (Hayaat Alamaliyat), the al-Baraa Ibn Malik Battalion – affiliated with the Islamic Movement – also re-emerged. This unit, which later expanded from a battalion into a full brigade, has been actively fighting alongside the SAF against the RSF.<sup>89</sup> Thus, for the Islamists, the continuation of the war and their participation in it, until the defeat of the RSF, serves to protect the gains they have secured during the conflict and to reaffirm their reemergence in the corridors of power. By fully embracing a zero-sum approach, they view any potential negotiation process as a threat to these interests and achievements.

Power-related incentives – fueled by mutual fear between the SAF and RSF – drove escalation in several ways. However, this was not the sole factor. The dynamics of the political economy, coupled with external influences, also contributed to the expansion and prolongation of the war. At the same time, the unfolding developments of the conflict generated new factors that further complicated the nature of the war and its resulting consequences, as previously illustrated – rendering the scene more entangled and complex.

In analyzing the drivers and dynamics of the political economy during wartime, researcher and writer Al-Haj Warraq notes: “In a wartime economy, kleptocratic networks<sup>90</sup> have limited capacity to benefit from wartime resources. War is not the ideal environment for exploiting state resources; the most favorable climate is stability. Therefore, simplistic interpretations that reduce wartime resource looting to regional and international greed – viewed as an independent variable directly linked to a desire to prolong the war – fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of the conflict’s dynamics and persistence. The factors behind the continuation of war, at local, regional, and international levels, require a multifaceted analysis that incorporates

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the interview on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/XShXKmC-qBOg?si=fiJ243e6u4hVxBwg> minute 9.

<sup>89</sup> The gateway to participation in the war and will Sudan’s Islamists return to power, Sudan Tribune, op. cit.

<sup>90</sup> Kleptocracy is a Latin-derived term made up of two parts: *klepto*, meaning “thief,” and *cracy*, meaning “rule” or “power” so its literal meaning is “rule of thieves” or “thieves’ power, refers to a system where those in power seize state resources for personal gain. Unlike ordinary corruption, which occurs within functioning institutions, kleptocracy turns the entire state apparatus into a tool for systematic looting by a small ruling elite.

geopolitical dimensions, port-related rivalries, regional competition, as well as domestic political structures, and the strategic interests of all involved parties. War is a complex and multilayered phenomenon.”<sup>91</sup>

## **3. Discussion and Conclusion**

### **3.1. Discussion**

It is clear from the overall findings and conclusions of the paper that Sudan’s conflict did not erupt suddenly. The transitional period that followed the fall of President Omar Al-Bashir’s regime revealed the fragility of the governance structures and created a fertile environment for a progressive conflict that eventually resulted in the parties resorting to violence as the main means of managing conflict and competing for power. After President Omar Al-Bashir’s regime fell, Sudan entered a fragile transitional period. During this time, weak governance structures allowed rival factions to compete for power.

Within this context, factors related to the political economy played a pivotal role in fueling competition and intensifying the conflict. These factors include access to natural resources such as gold reserves, smuggling routes, and export channels, in addition to powerful economic enterprises controlled by various branches of the security apparatus. The war has clearly demonstrated how the SAF have sought to benefit from official state institutions and public financing, while the RSF have continued to rely on multiple funding sources – including gold revenues and external support from regional and international actors who view the conflict as an arena for advancing their own geopolitical interests. These diverse streams of financing have provided both sides with the means to sustain a prolonged conflict, enabling them to wage repeated bouts of violence and reject political settlements that fail to satisfy their ambitions for power and wealth.

Although the war initially stemmed from direct disputes over power-sharing and political influence, developments on the ground soon gave rise to more complex dynamics and new contexts of tension. This

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<sup>91</sup> Hajj Warraq, writer and politician, phone interview, 25/11/2024.

became evident in the intensification of ethnic and tribal alignments as the conflict dragged on, creating new lines of affiliation that transcended traditional political loyalties. A deepening sense of mistrust emerged among different social groups, paving the way for ethnically and regionally driven escalations that further militarized the conflict and made it more violent.

The impact of these alignments was not limited to the battlefield. They also shaped the narrative landscape, as media and political discourse began to take on increasingly sectarian and exclusionary tones. This type of messaging severely fractured Sudan's social fabric, leaving communities more vulnerable to radical political projects rooted in divisive narratives that often sought to marginalize or delegitimize specific social or political groups.

The study also reveals that conflict management throughout the transitional period and during the war was shaped by what can be described as a "hybrid governance" model. This model consisted of a mixture of military leaders, civilian figures allied with the military, and armed movements or political factions, each seeking to secure a share of power. This form of governance produced fragmented internal and external alliances, often grounded in clientelist relationships or regional alignments. Each actor within this hybrid system adopted exclusionary policies aimed at consolidating power by sidelining or weakening rivals, which in turn fostered a persistent state of political polarization. This was clear in the months leading up to the outbreak of war when members of the former regime threatened to derail the political process represented by the Framework Agreement. At the same time, the military component itself failed to form a unified vision of how to integrate the RSF or restructure the security sector.

On another front, conflicting external alliances further deepened the crisis of war, as each side in the conflict benefited from potential support from various regional and international actors. Some of these actors pursued economic interests – such as investment in minerals, agriculture, or port infrastructure – while others viewed Sudan as a strategic arena for regional competition and geopolitical alignment. Notably, the presence of Islamist elements and figures affiliated with the former Bashir regime within the army and security institutions fueled hardline mobilization narratives. These narratives framed the rise of the RSF as an existential threat, not necessarily due to the RSF's mere nature or presence, but because its continued

prominence could obstruct the Islamists' return to power.

At the same time, the RSF itself actively sought to expand its regional and international ties to secure financial support and pursue international legitimacy, both vital for sustaining its military campaign against the SAF. These intersecting factors, exclusionary politics, conflicting power visions, and competition over resources ultimately fueled the ongoing cycle of violence and escalating confrontations.

Accordingly, the war can be described as the "culmination of an escalating pattern" that began with localized political and economic disputes but gradually expanded to affect nearly every aspect of Sudanese life, amid a persistent failure to achieve political consensus or de-escalation. The crisis has ceased to be merely political; it has become societal, economic, and international in scope. Decades of authoritarian rule and internal wars, in the South, Darfur, and other regions, have left deep imprints on the structure of the Sudanese state. As a result, the state has become a "battleground" where all actors, including official security forces, compete to secure their shares in the absence of a strong and legitimate governing system capable of establishing clear democratic foundations for governance and power-sharing.

All this makes it clear that competition over resources is not the sole driver of the war, but rather a reinforcing factor for its continuation and the deadlock of resolution efforts. When any party gains control over a significant portion of the country's natural or financial resources, it acquires a powerful leverage point over others. In a context where domestic factors are entangled with external interventions, resolving the conflict becomes far more complex. The outcome is no longer solely determined by local actors; instead, it is shaped by the strategic interests of regional and international powers, some of which may prefer a perpetually unstable Sudan if it serves their direct or indirect interests.

## **3.2. Conclusion**

In conclusion, viewing Sudan's April war merely as a transient military clash over power oversimplifies the deeper dynamics at play. This conflict reflects a historical accumulation of internal grievances, political-economic structures, and complex regional and international entanglements. It has become clear how political and economic factors have intersected with ethnic and regional compositions

to reinforce a resort to force, with violence emerging as a natural extension of limited choices that failed to accommodate diverse demands or establish fair mechanisms for power and wealth distribution.

Driven by political fragmentation and the dominance of armed actors, the war has produced a far more complex reality – one in which the conflict no longer centers solely on the transitional authority or reforming the military. Instead, it has evolved into a landscape of shifting alliances and conflicting narratives: from sharp ethnic and regional discourses to ideological agendas that have brought Islamist forces back to the forefront. As such, analyses that frame the war as a simple binary conflict between the army and the RSF fall short. Other internal and external actors have entered the arena, each with its own interests to secure any potential future truce or political settlement.

In contrast to the view that the war erupted as a sudden slip into violence, the analysis shows that the trajectory of escalation was evident well before the outbreak of fighting. The transitional government was repeatedly shaken by open tensions between civilian and military actors, which eventually evolved into internal divisions within the security apparatus itself following the 2021 coup. This fragmentation ultimately led to the use of armed violence as a means of resolving political disputes. Such an outcome would have been unlikely without the convergence of political fractures, socioeconomic divisions, and regional interventions that supplied resources and arms, making the option of force and violence increasingly appealing to both sides.

The war also generated new dynamics, most notably the strengthening of ethnic and regional identities. This is reflected in the intensifying mobilization rhetoric among tribal groups who came to believe they stood to lose significantly unless they aligned decisively with either the army or the RSF. As a result, the conflict's discourse was reshaped to reflect competing regional and ethnic narratives, further fragmenting Sudan's social fabric and deepening the ethnopolitical dimensions of the war. This shift in framing made the conflict more brutal, introduced new layers of popular polarization, and ultimately contributed to prolonging the war and exacerbating the suffering of civilians.

Conversely, members of the former regime, particularly those affiliated with the Islamist movement and Al-Bashir's government, feared being entirely excluded from the political landscape if

new arrangements were to strip them of their past privileges. As a result, the ethnic-religious-political alignments evolved into a volatile mix fueled and shaped by violence. This convergence of identity and power struggles entrenched a deep polarization, posing a serious threat to the cohesion and unity of Sudan's social fabric.

From a broader perspective, this war serves as a live case study illustrating the deep interconnection between violence and the interplay of political conflicts with elements of political economy and external influences. The transitional period in Sudan was, at its core, an opportunity to re-establish the state. However, diverging agendas and factional interests squandered that opportunity, with the military ultimately deciding to seize power through a coup – pushing the country to the brink of full-scale armed conflict. This trajectory was further reinforced by mutual convictions among the warring parties that a military solution, despite its cost, could yield quicker and greater rewards than political compromise. Additionally, the regional context, characterized by competitive power dynamics, facilitated external support for those seeking to fund and exploit the war for overlapping hegemonic ambitions.

Accordingly, it is essential to reflect deeply on the reality that ending this war cannot be achieved through a temporary ceasefire or a partial understanding between the leadership of the army and the RSF. Current dynamics reveal the urgent need for an inclusive dialogue that considers the fragile structure of the Sudanese state and seriously addresses the reconstruction of security institutions on a national basis. It must also involve the establishment of fair economic arrangements that prevent the monopolization of resources by armed groups, factions within formal security apparatus, or former rebel movements. Furthermore, any proposed solution that overlooks the role of external actors is likely to falter or collapse, since these actors may choose to sustain or reignite the conflict if they see it as a tool for regional leverage or economic gain. It becomes clear, then, that describing the war as a limited conflict fails to capture the full picture. The underlying realities point to deep-rooted causes tied to Sudan's rentier economy, longstanding power struggles between the center and the peripheries, and the incomplete project of state-building since independence. While internal political forces still lack the will to formulate long-term solutions that address these structural legacies, external initiatives remain little more than temporary fire-fighting efforts. Without the formulation of new political compacts

for governing the country and the implementation of deep institutional reforms, the threat of renewed war will continue to loom over both the Sudanese people and the international community.

To that end, Sudan urgently requires a comprehensive approach that addresses political, economic, and social dimensions simultaneously. Peripheral regions must no longer be marginalized, and power should not remain concentrated in the hands of elites, particularly military elites, who repeatedly resort to force, violence, war, and coups when political compromise fails. Failing to recognize this interconnection leads to overly simplistic interpretations of the war, which overlook the complex factors that ignited the conflict in the first place. Any serious vision for resolving the Sudanese crisis must acknowledge the country's long history of internal warfare and draw lessons from the repeated failure of partial agreements that ignored the structural roots of economic and ethnic marginalization – opting instead for deals with a narrow group of political or military elites.

Any lasting peace cannot come from a short-lived ceasefire or a partial agreement between SAF and RSF leaders. The country needs an inclusive dialogue that addresses Sudan's fragile state structures. It must also tackle security sector reform on a national scale. Economic arrangements need to be fair so that no single group can monopolize resources. Any peace process that ignores the role of external actors is unlikely to hold because those actors might simply stoke instability for their own gain.

In short, the war is rooted in Sudan's rentier economy, longstanding center-periphery power struggles, and a history of incomplete state-building. Until there is a strong, democratic civilian government supported by a unified, professional military, the risk of renewed conflict remains high. Only comprehensive solutions – covering political, economic, and social dimensions – can break the cycle. If those solutions remain out of reach, Sudan will continue to slide from one ceasefire to the next escalation, each time at great cost to its people.

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## Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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