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# Split, talks or takeover – three scenarios for the Sudan war

Local roots, external actors and policy options



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## SUMMARY

**WHAT'S NEW?** After nearly three years of political instability and fighting, Sudan's civil war has reached a critical turning point. The RSF's takeover of El-Fasher (October 2025), reportedly accompanied by mass atrocities, highlights accelerating state fragmentation and the consolidation of parallel administrative and security structures across much of the country. National cohesion is eroding. Against this backdrop, the war appears to be crystallising into three plausible trajectories, assessed here in terms of probability and strategic impact.

**WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?** Sudan's war is no longer primarily internal, but is a regional challenge. Sudan's geographical position, connecting the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, means that prolonged instability threatens trade routes, migration corridors and neighbouring states. Continued fragmentation also creates openings for intensified external interference, complicating de-escalation.

**WHO NEEDS TO DO WHAT?** The EU and its member states should intensify diplomatic efforts to curb regional military and financial support and ensure compliance with international norms. The EU should also strengthen oversight of gold and other conflict-linked supply chains, while expanding support for stabilisation and refugee-hosting capacities. Mediation initiatives – currently divided across the AU, IGAD and Gulf states – should be aligned into a single coherent process. Regional actors, notably the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, have a critical role to play in reshaping the incentives of the belligerents and should channel their engagement toward coordinated diplomatic pressure and support for a unified mediation framework.

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**Cover:** Photo montage of Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Mohammed bin Salman, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo ('Hemedti'), and Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

# Split, talks or takeover – three scenarios for the Sudan war

## Local roots, external actors and policy options

Sudan's civil war has evolved into a grinding, increasingly regionalised conflict fuelled by security fragmentation, rival war economies and centre–periphery divides. The Gulf monarchies and neighbouring powers shape the battlefield through arms, finance and diplomatic cover, deepening proxy-war dynamics. Three scenarios now dominate: a high-likelihood drift toward a de facto split, a possible Gulf-driven return to talks, or a lower-probability military takeover by one of the two warring parties.



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**S**udan's civil war has reached a critical and potentially irreversible turning point. The conflict is now arguably crystallising around three plausible future trajectories: a prolonged war of attrition and de facto fragmentation; a forced return to negotiations driven by a recalibration of regional sponsors; or a decisive military breakthrough followed by widespread retaliatory violence. This analysis focuses on these scenarios, showing how Sudan's trajectory is shaped by the interaction between domestic rivalries and external strategic interests. What began in April 2023 as a power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has evolved into a protracted conflict marked by mass displacement, state fragmentation and deepening external involvement. Fighting that started in Khartoum and Darfur has spread nationwide, fuelled by a fragmented security apparatus, competing economic interests and entrenched centre–periphery inequalities. The RSF's capture of El-Fasher in October 2025, followed by reports of mass killings, highlights the war's escalating brutality and regionalisation. External backing, especially from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, has sustained the belligerents through military, financial and political support, making compromise harder.

### Local roots of the conflict

Sudan's civil war is rooted in domestic dynamics that long precede the 2019 revolution. While regional actors

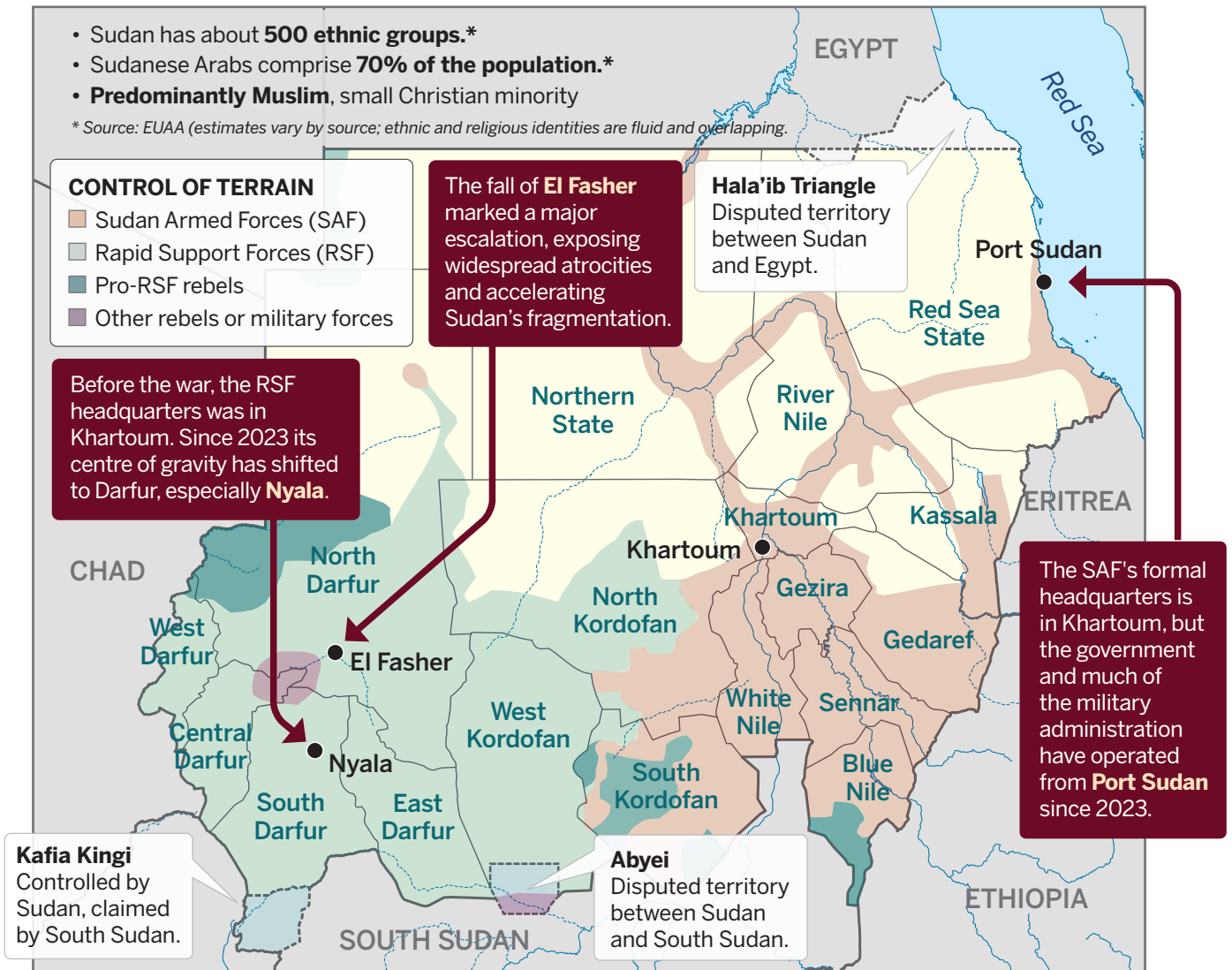
now shape the hostilities, the conflict's foundations lie in structural tensions within Sudan's political and security order. Several interlocking dynamics help explain the intensity of the war between the SAF and the RSF.

First, the conflict reflects a legacy of security fragmentation. From 2013, the state relied on a dual system of formal military structures alongside parallel armed forces to manage rebellions and internal dissent. The RSF emerged from this strategy: formed as a counter-insurgency militia in Darfur, it evolved into a powerful paramilitary organisation with independent command structures, revenue streams and political ambitions. After 2019, the uneasy Burhan–Hemedti partnership masked a deep institutional rivalry, while attempts to integrate the RSF into the army intensified competition over coercive authority and national leadership.

Second, both forces are sustained by rival economic power networks. The SAF draws on extensive military-controlled businesses, while the RSF has built an independent base through gold mining and cross-border trade routes. And third, the war is embedded in Sudan's centre–periphery divide, where long-marginalised regions contest the dominance of riverine elites. Together, these dynamics create a conflict that is highly resistant to compromise.

### External actors and their strategic interests

Sudan's civil war is tightly linked to the geopolitics of the Red Sea, the Gulf and the Nile Basin. Linking the



**Control of terrain** in the Sudan War as per 5 March 2026. Source: Critical Threats, American Enterprise Institute (AEI).

Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea corridor, Sudan has become a strategic focal point, where regional security concerns and economic interests shape the conflict. The following subsections examine key actors and how they shape the war's trajectory.

**SAUDI ARABIA.** Riyadh's engagement in Sudan is driven by Red Sea security concerns and a strong preference for a unified state able to contain armed groups and prevent regional spillover. Riyadh has long viewed the SAF as the primary guarantor of state authority, a relationship reinforced during the Yemen war through close military cooperation. Today, Saudi policy remains broadly aligned with the SAF and coordinated with Egypt, reflecting shared concerns over fragmentation, border insecurity and non-state armed actors. Saudi support is mainly diplomatic and political, avoiding direct escalation.

**UNITED ARAB EMIRATES.** Since the Arab Spring in 2011, the UAE has sought to expand security and

economic influence across the Horn of Africa, making Sudan a strategic arena. Abu Dhabi has cultivated close ties with the RSF and Hemedti, rooted in cooperation during the Yemen war, commercial interdependence, and shared interests in controlling key trade and security corridors. Economic networks channel gold from Darfur and other conflict zones into global markets through Dubai, generating liquidity and linking the RSF to transnational brokerage networks. Flexible, informal channels help move supplies, personnel and capital, sustaining the RSF's military capacity and its political relevance.

**EGYPT.** Cairo primarily views Sudan in terms of national security, prioritising stability along its southern border, Nile Basin water security and the regional balance of power. Decades of cooperation on border control, counterterrorism, and managing instability in Darfur have made the SAF Cairo's preferred and predictable state partner. As the RSF expanded its capa-

bilities, bolstered by foreign arms, drones and external financing, Egypt increasingly came to see it as a destabilising force, especially if it advanced toward northern Sudan. These concerns, heightened by tensions with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), reinforce Egypt’s commitment to preventing Sudan’s fragmentation. A divided Sudan could weaken border security, accelerate irregular migration and create space for non-state armed actors in an area that Cairo considers to be strategically vital.

**ADDITIONAL ACTORS.** Beyond the Gulf monarchies and Egypt, several other actors play secondary but relevant roles in Sudan’s conflict landscape. *Libya* and *Chad*, for example, provide shifting support shaped by commercial interests and cross-border clan ties in the Darfur and Kordofan regions.

*Russia’s* involvement in Sudan is driven by strategic and economic interests. Moscow seeks a foothold on the shores of the Red Sea, especially Port Sudan, to project power along key maritime routes. It also benefits from Sudanese gold, linked to Wagner-associated networks, which has been invaluable in the face of Western sanctions. Russia has hedged by maintaining formal ties with the SAF, while Wagner reportedly supported the RSF with weapons, training and logistics. In the UN, Moscow has used its diplomatic leverage to shield its interests, including blocking ceasefire efforts.

*China’s* role in Sudan is pragmatic and driven by economic interests, including oil, mining and infrastructure linked to the Belt and Road Initiative. While instability threatens these investments, Beijing balances influence with non-interference and avoids backing either side openly. Chinese weapons and equipment nonetheless

reach the battlefield, often via third parties. By maintaining operations and protecting long-term assets, China indirectly sustains militarisation without overt escalation.

*Türkiye* combines strategic ambition with commercial interest in Sudan and the Red Sea region. Ankara has positioned itself as a security partner to Sudan’s government, while Turkish defence industry companies, particularly Baykar, have supplied drones, munitions and technical support to strengthen SAF air capabilities. These ties may also open access up to Sudanese minerals and port projects. *Türkiye* simultaneously offers mediation, boosting its diplomatic leverage.

Russia, China and *Türkiye* have widened Sudan’s war into a geopolitical contest. Foreign weapons, including drones and missiles, have intensified the fighting, while the strategic and economic stake of these actors reduces the incentives for compromise. In parallel, arms and ammunition have entered the conflict through secondary suppliers, including countries such as *Serbia* and *Pakistan*, often via indirect or opaque transfer channels. Russia pursues leverage and gold-linked influence; China prioritises stability to protect its investments; *Türkiye* seeks regional influence and commercial gain. Together, they sustain militarisation and prolong the conflict.

**Mechanisms of external influence**

Sudan’s war is rooted at home, but the sustained fighting by the SAF and RSF depends heavily on external backing, especially from the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Their support, direct and indirect, keeps supply chains, financing and diplomacy functioning. External influence operates through distinct but interconnected channels:



For a more detailed timeline of key milestones in the Sudan war, see [WWW.NAI.SE/SUDANWAR](http://WWW.NAI.SE/SUDANWAR)

# THREE SCENARIOS FOR THE SUDANESE CIVIL WAR



## SCENARIO 1:

### SPLIT

**Prolonged war of attrition and consolidation of de facto separate entities.**

No decisive breakthrough emerges. Front lines stabilise into a protracted war of attrition, driving Sudan toward de facto territorial and institutional fragmentation, as the SAF and RSF entrench parallel rule.

#### KEY ASSUMPTIONS:

- Neither SAF nor RSF achieves decisive military advantage.
- External sponsors continue to sustain both sides, avoiding escalation while preventing collapse.
- Mediation efforts remain fragmented and ineffective.

#### THE STANCE OF INTERNAL ACTORS:

Both entities reinforce their strongholds (SAF in the northeast and the RSF across parts of Darfur and Kordofan) and institutionalise taxation, service provision and security structures, thus deepening separation. Defections occur, but do not shift the balance.

#### THE STANCE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS:

The UAE continues to enable the RSF's war economy, while Saudi Arabia and Egypt back the SAF. Neither side withdraws support, and no coordinated regional pressure emerges.

#### EXPECTED OUTCOME:

Sudan will evolve into a "hybrid" fragmented state, resembling Libya's political geography, with competing authorities, porous borders, chronic humanitarian crises and expanding space for non-state actors. Spillover risks rise for South Sudan and Chad, driven by displacement, arms flows and cross-border militia mobilisation. This scenario entrenches instability and makes reunification unlikely.



## SCENARIO 2:

### TALKS

**Strategic recalculation by Gulf partners and a forced return to negotiations.**

A shift in the strategic calculations of Gulf actors, shaped by overstretch, reputational costs or US/EU diplomacy, reduces support for the belligerents and pushes them toward a ceasefire and talks.

#### KEY ASSUMPTIONS:

- The UAE reassesses the costs of backing the RSF.
- Saudi Arabia and Egypt judge SAF backing to be unsustainable without political gains.
- Multilateral diplomacy aligns behind one AU-IGAD-Gulf track.

#### THE STANCE OF INTERNAL ACTORS:

As external resources decline, both the SAF and the RSF would become more inclined to engage in talks, even without abandoning their zero-sum objectives. Internal fractures within the two coalitions would further strengthen incentives for a political track.

#### THE STANCE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS:

The UAE reduces RSF support, while Saudi Arabia and Egypt pressure the SAF to engage politically. Western actors reinforce unified diplomatic incentives.

#### EXPECTED OUTCOME:

A negotiated framework becomes possible, beginning with a limited ceasefire and talks on power distribution and security arrangements. Implementation remains fragile, but external alignment offers the first viable opening for de-escalation since 2023.



## SCENARIO 3:

### TAKEOVER

**Decisive military breakthrough and widespread retaliatory violence.**

One of the two parties achieves a significant military breakthrough – via collapsing resistance, key defections or disrupted supply lines – leading to rapid territorial gains.

#### KEY ASSUMPTIONS:

- Local alliances in Darfur or Khartoum shift abruptly.
- One external sponsor temporarily increases support, or the rival sponsor reduces it.
- Command cohesion in the losing camp deteriorates.

#### THE STANCE OF INTERNAL ACTORS:

The victorious faction consolidates power and initiates reprisals against perceived collaborators. Governance weakens rather than stabilises.

#### THE STANCE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS:

External actors adapt opportunistically. Supporters of the winning side reinforce legitimacy claims, while rivals either recalibrate or attempt to preserve influence through local proxies.

#### EXPECTED OUTCOME:

Despite an apparent "victory", Sudan faces cycles of revenge, communal violence, fragmentation and continued large-scale displacement. Regional spillover intensifies, particularly toward Chad and South Sudan, leaving little short-term scope for reconstruction.

**These scenarios**, which are not mutually exclusive, predict the main directions the war may take. **Scenario likelihoods** depend on the alignment between Sudan's internal fragmentation and external actors' strategies shaping whether the status quo holds, erodes, or shifts abruptly.

**MILITARY AND LOGISTICAL SUPPORT.** External support is sustained through military and logistical networks spanning the Red Sea, the Gulf and Sudan's western borders. The RSF relies on cargo aircraft, private flights and transit hubs to move weapons, fuel and supplies, often routed through intermediaries in Chad or Libya and enabled by informal security actors and commercial brokers. The SAF depends more on state-to-state partnerships. Egypt provides training, equipment and air support, while Saudi Arabia offers political cover and helps keep supply channels open, including by facilitating defence-related arrangements with third countries, such as Pakistan.

**FINANCIAL AND COMMERCIAL NETWORKS.** Financial flows and commercial networks are a key channel of external influence. The RSF functions like an armed business conglomerate, drawing revenue from Darfur gold, cross-border trade and offshore accounts. Much of Sudan's gold reaches global markets via Dubai, allowing

the RSF to turn resources into liquidity, weapons and political leverage. The SAF relies on military-owned companies spanning agriculture, manufacturing and fuel imports, enabling funding outside civilian oversight. Backed by Gulf investments, these parallel war economies sustain the conflict and weaken the incentives for compromise.

**DIPLOMATIC COVER AND POLITICAL SPONSORSHIP.** Diplomatic sponsorship is a third channel of external influence. Saudi Arabia and Egypt bolster the SAF's international legitimacy by framing it as the guarantor of state continuity, while the Jeddah talks – negotiations between SAF and RSF held in Jeddah under Saudi leadership – offer a recognised platform. The RSF benefits from more flexible political cover through UAE engagement routed via personal networks and informal intermediaries. This asymmetric backing limits coordinated external pressure and complicates unified mediation efforts by the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) or Western actors. ■

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the escalation of Sudan's civil war requires urgent and coordinated international action to reduce external support for armed actors, strengthen oversight of conflict resources and stabilise the broader region.

➔ **Limit external military sponsorship to Sudanese belligerents.** The EU, together with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UN, should work to curb the external supply of arms, drones and logistical support that sustains the conflict. This requires intensified EU–Gulf diplomatic engagement, stronger monitoring of air cargo and private flights, and more robust reporting through UN mechanisms.

➔ **Strengthen oversight of gold supply chains linked to the conflict.** The EU, UAE, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and relevant international financial institutions should tighten oversight of gold flows by enhancing EU due diligence requirements, improving refinery transparency through cooperation with Gulf jurisdictions, and expanding measures against money laundering and financing of terrorism to disrupt conflict revenue streams.

➔ **Consolidate mediation efforts into a single, coordinated track.** The AU, IGAD, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, EU and USA should

align their diplomatic initiatives under one unified mediation framework. Coordinated political and technical support would reduce fragmented diplomacy and increase pressure for negotiations that focus on security arrangements and humanitarian access.

➔ **Prioritise regional stabilisation to contain spillover.** The EU, UN, AU and the governments of Chad and South Sudan should jointly strengthen regional resilience by improving border management, enhancing local conflict-prevention efforts and coordinating humanitarian operations to maintain access corridors and address displacement pressures.

➔ **Enhance security coordination in the Red Sea and Sahel–Horn corridors.** The EU (through its EU maritime security project Crimario and the French-led maritime monitoring mission European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz, EMASoH), the Red Sea Council, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and IGAD should deepen cooperation to protect maritime routes and prevent the spread of armed actors along strategic corridors. This includes integrating Sudan into Red Sea security dialogues and expanding EU maritime and counter-trafficking capacity-building. ■



## About this policy note

Sudan's civil war has evolved into a grinding, increasingly regionalised conflict fuelled by security fragmentation, rival war economies and centre-periphery divides. The Gulf monarchies and neighbouring powers shape the battlefield through arms, finance and diplomatic cover, deepening proxy-war dynamics. Three scenarios now dominate: a high-likelihood drift toward a de facto split, a possible Gulf-driven return to talks, or a lower-probability military takeover by one of the two warring parties.



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This policy note is based on SDG-relevant research concerning goal 16.