

POLICY BRIEF

**Situation analysis
on the root causes of
current internal armed
conflict in the Sudan**



**American
Friends
Service
Committee**



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Salama Hub
Nurturing Solutions for a Peaceful Africa

Abbreviations

AACC	All Africa Conference of Churches
AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
AU	African Union
CAR	Central Africa Republic
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
CEWARN	Conflict Early Warning and Early Response Mechanism
CEWERUs	Conflict Early Warning Response Units
FBOs	Faith-Based Organisations
HoA	Horn of Africa
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IGAD	Inter-Governmental Authority on Development
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IOM	International Organization for Migration of the UN
MSF	Médicins Sans Frontières
NSAs	Non- State Actors
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
RECs	Regional Economic Commissions
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SSR	Security Sector Reform
SPLM-N	Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement-North
TCEW	Technical Committee on Early Warning
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WFP	World Food Programme of the UN

Executive summary

The current conflict in Sudan pits the leader, General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), against his former deputy leader, General Muhammed Hamdan Dagalo, of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The interested parties include the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, as the two countries have played significant roles in Sudan's military-led transition since 2021.

The war's consequences are staggering, with the tragic loss of thousands of lives. In addition, the war has displaced millions within the country and into neighboring states like Chad, Egypt, CAR, and South Sudan, triggered a major humanitarian crisis, caused severe infrastructural damages, and generated massive economic loss – estimated at over \$4 billion. The conflict has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the Horn of Africa, deepened insecurity and political instability, heightened the possibility of intervention by outside powers, and further destabilised Sudan's neighbours. The governments of the United States and Saudi Arabia have been leading joint mediation efforts in Jeddah since May 2023, with little success as ceasefires have failed to hold. Women and youth are not involved in the peace processes, as the most significant population that bears the brunt of conflict in terms of sexual and gender-based violence has been absent. The youth and the traditional religious leaders have also been largely absent.

Introduction

The genesis of the current Sudan Armed Conflict dates to the tyrannical rule of strongman Omar al-Bashir. He was appointed Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation, having led a revolt against Prime Minister Sadiq el-Mahdi in a bloodless coup d'état on 30th June 1989, thus putting an end to a new democratic system that was instituted in 1985. The Revolutionary Council was disbanded in October 1993, and al-Bashir ascended to political power in a sham election. During his reign, Sudan suffered a severe lack of rule of law (RoL), inter-sectoral sub-clannism rifts, political tensions and instability, deepening economic crisis, secession by South Sudan, accelerated internal displacements, and adverse climate change effects, among other challenges. Intensified hostilities, fighting across Sudan, and other impediments and obstacles faced by aid organizations continue to make access to people in need incredibly challenging and unpredictable.

In the current conflict in Sudan, the leader (General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan) of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and deputy leader (General Muhammed Hamdan Dagalo) of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) disagreed. Each faction of the governing council claimed higher stakes after Omar el-Bashir's ouster. As the masses agitated for an immediate march towards restoring civilian rule, pressure on the two leaders and their followers mounted. Key among the issues in contention was the integration of the RSF into the mainstream Sudan Army. RSF largely comprised of the remnants of the Janjaweed (Arabic and English translation: means "armed devil on horseback") who had been deployed to suppress dissent by non-Arabs in Darfur, Western Sudan, ruthlessly. Imminent, unmistakable fissures started to occur a few weeks before the split between

SAF and RAF erupted into violence. These early warning signs were ignored. On April 15, 2023, RSF attacked government installations, and SAF responded with airstrikes. Its ground forces engaged in fierce combat against the RSF, with massive destruction of property infrastructure, displacement, and loss of lives. The International Development Partners operating in Sudan were evacuated to safe destinations via Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Research on the Situational Analysis of the conflict in Sudan was commissioned by the Salama Hub Project (AFSC) based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to investigate the root causes of the conflict, the key driving actors, and the consequences on the population. This Policy Brief is derived from the research detail report.

The Salama Hub Project is a joint project between AFSC, AACC, and one other International NGO of European origin. This presents an opportunity to make a significant contribution by equipping African Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations in the Horn of Africa region with evidence through research to positively influence conflict situations and policy development, ultimately contributing to peace and stability. AFSC was the lead agency in the research on behalf of the joint initiative.

The findings form a basis for formulating necessary policy engagement and advocacy to call for peaceful solutions to the conflict in Sudan. The study used a mixed-method approach that involved desk reviews, interviews, consultations, and questionnaires. The findings of the study are summarised below.

Root causes, dynamics, and key actors of the conflict

Root causes

The Sudan conflict has evolved gradually, thus conforming to the organic nature of most conflicts. The fragility of the state has been a constant in the analyses since independence in 1956 and even before this, characterized by lawlessness and violence. Post-independence history is dominated by political and civil strife. The oppressive system of governance is an omnipresent root cause. Others are:

- Skewed administration by the federal government, thus creating class segregation (sectionalism)
- Perennial racial division between Arabs and Africans, hence a perception of relative deprivation
- Political legacy where power is accessed and transferred through brute force rather than transparent democratic elections
- Economic policies and practices that only serve to draw divisions among the citizenry, hence inequality
- Cultural values vs states' rights
- Deeply fragmented military

The underlying causes of the current armed conflict are traceable to the April 2019 coup led by army generals against President al-Bashir's authoritarian regime. Destructive cross-border communal conflicts are often triggered by environmental factors and natural resource sharing between/among communities. Else, the trans-boundary nature of environmental issues. Being frontier-blind, disregarding international environmental laws, and taking undue advantage of the porosity of national borders by pastoral communities has exacerbated the evolution to full-blown and ultimately dysfunctional (violent) conflict.

Dynamics of the conflict

Conflicts in Sudan are historically embedded and remain grounded in the following:

- Structural, regional imbalances and competition over power and resources. These tend to trigger identity-based conflicts, including around ethnic and religious formations.
- Ethnic conflict based on lack of embrace of diversity among 19 major ethnic groups and over 597 ethnic sub-groups, speaking more than 100 languages and dialects. Arab-speaking Muslims form the largest single ethnic group, estimated at 70 percent of the total population.
- Mostly, Arab groups dominate the Khartoum-based economic and political power center and more peripheral areas in the West, East, and South, which causes and heightens grievances bearing identity and even religious undertones.
- The fertile Nile River valley has always attracted settlement and economic activity, resulting in land-related disputes and conflicts between indigenous and non-indigenous groups.
- Non-inclusivity mode in governance by the elite coalition at the center (Khartoum) tends to manipulate and entrench a monopoly of economic power through extensive patronage networks. This has the effect of creating a feeling of relative deprivation among the oppressed.
- The dysfunctional and elite-captured economy has entrenched substantial inequalities and macro-fiscal vulnerabilities that have pushed Sudan to the brink of economic collapse.
- Energy subsidies (energy is a crucial sector of Sudan's economy) remain skewed and benefit the rich disproportionately to the exclusion of the masses.
- Regional imbalances and patterns of social exclusion created multiple grievances based on marginalization, skewed service delivery, and disenfranchisement of women and youth.
- The governance deficits translated to weak institutional capacities to mitigate and regulate conflicts, resulting in intra- and inter-communal struggles over land, water, and natural resources, exacerbated by climatic change and population growth.

Key actors

Several international and national actors have played out for influence in Sudan, thus fueling political and religious tensions, including jostling over ideological and trade superiority and power contests. There are visible and invisible actors, such as:

i) Visible actors:

- Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF),
- Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM-N),
- United States of America, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates,
- International bodies like the UN and EU,
- The Arab League,
- The Regional Economic Communities, including the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD),
- International non-state actors (NSAs), civil society organizations (CSOs), Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs), Women, and the youth.

ii) Invisible actors:

- China, Russia (Wagner Group), Canada, Germany, Sweden, Norway, and Morocco are on the periphery.

Each identified actor plays a different role in advancing the agenda of ending the violent conflict and returning Sudan to the desired path of peace and democracy.

Key driving factors

- An unfettered quest for political power ensures a grip of economic power by both the SAF and the RSF, coupled with the issue of reintegration of the RSF troops.
- Socioeconomics and, by extension, control of national purse strings drive the military leaders' resolve to annihilate their adversary(ies).

- Continued push for a military solution. This, however, is beginning to fade. Both sides see a protracted military engagement with no outright gains of national power.

Early warning signs of the conflict

The current fighting was preceded by a six-month build-up of tensions triggered by Sudan's political process.

- The collapse of the SAF and RSF concerted teamwork in October 2021 was an unmistakable indication of the deterioration of relations with the interim ruling council.
- Launch of a new political process pledging to address essential concerns before signing a final agreement to reinstate a civilian administration entrusted with directing the country to elections in two years.
- RSF push for integration into the Sudan army, military withdrawal from profitable areas of the economy, and the prospect of troops facing justice for past abuses.
- Security sector reforms (SSR): Essentially, the most crucial problem to be resolved is to reign in the security forces; nevertheless, this process was hurried and *ad hoc*, resulting in heightened tensions between the RSF and the SAF.
- Deployment of troops by RSF to the northern city of Merowe on April 13 (two days before the war broke out), prompting a warning from the army that the RSF must withdraw or else security in Sudan would collapse.
- The Quad - the United States, United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia - engaged in several activities to broker a settlement to the dispute, while the UN political mission in Sudan made feeble separate efforts.
- Fighting erupted on 15 April, with the two forces embarking on a protracted violent struggle at the expense of the Sudanese people.

Exclusion of women and youth

Women and the youth continue to be systematically excluded from ongoing peace efforts in Su-

dan despite their 2018/2019 role in pushing for the ouster of Omar el-Bashir. Women are often assigned non-core roles and primarily relegated to the margins. There is a “lack of recognition and support to peace initiatives by women and young people.” Peace processes generally involve military and politicians”.

- The ongoing peace efforts have hitherto focused overwhelmingly on parties to the conflict, much to the exclusion of the people of Sudan, especially women and the youth, which is a cause for genuine concern.
- Inclusion of women and youth while navigating the devastating consequences of the war could gain from relative ease if they (women and youth) occupy their rightful place in the peace process.
- Religious and cultural factors institutionalized in Sudan’s political history are littered with evidence of men’s hegemony that parallels women’s struggle for recognition and inclusion.
- Before December 2018, there was a visible absence of women and youth in formal political spaces and decision-making roles. This slightly improved after the revolution when their role in the uprising was remarkably prominent and widely acknowledged. Women and the youth were the backbone of the pro-democracy revolution that led to the fall of al-Bashir in 2019.

The preceding notwithstanding, various women and youth groups continued to play an instrumental role following the coup in 2021 and have continued to demand democracy, justice, equality, and open and participatory governance in Sudan, demands that have stood the test of time.

Women and the youth remain committed to mobilizing for peace and ending the ongoing war. Among others, various women and youth groups are said to be leading various efforts, albeit with difficulties, towards monitoring conflict-related violations and building peace. The women and youth are mobilizing much-needed humanitarian assistance and providing crucial humanitarian support, such as shelter, food, water, healthcare, and psychosocial support to the victims and survivors of the violent conflict.

Challenges and constraints

- Absence of the UN from any significant role in the peace efforts. This is solely because of Sudan’s pariah status and its action of declaring Volker Perthes, former head of the UN political mission deployed since 2020 to support the transition post-Bashir, as persona non grata, thus creating a lacuna in the peace talks to end the fighting between the SAF and the RSF”.
- The joint US-Saudi-led Jeddah talks managed to bring together warring teams to the table, but they have been slow.
- Lack of clear pathway(s) out of the crisis. These may be countered by ensuring human rights are not violated, upholding IHL, and redoubling high-level efforts to urge both Generals to end the war through talks and a permanent ceasefire.
- Frequent suspensions of the peace talks have affected and caused numerous violations of ceasefire agreements between the warring parties.

Consequences/impacts of the conflict

Key Statistics: Impact of the Conflict on the Population:

- 24.7m People in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023.
- 18.1m People targeted for humanitarian assistance in September 2023.
- 4.2m Internally displaced since 15 April (IOM).
- 1.07m People who have crossed the border since 15 April (UNHCR).
- More than 50 humanitarian and human rights organizations are urging more assistance and solidarity with Sudan. The humanitarian crisis continues to grow and is set against the backdrop of protracted economic troubles and pre-existing conflicts in some parts of the country.
- Over 1,000 suspected measles cases were reported in September 2023, bringing the total number of cases across the country to 4,334 since April 2023.
- More than 1,200 refugee children have died in White Nile State due to suspected measles and underlying malnutrition (UNHCR).
- At least 72,000 people have been affected by

heavy rains and flooding across 16 localities in seven states.

- Thousands of people were killed and injured. UNHCR 22nd September estimates that over 1 million people have crossed borders with neighboring countries. 4.3 million people have fled their homes in search of safety inside Sudan and across its borders to neighbouring countries, mainly Chad, Egypt, and South Sudan. (UNHCR, 2023).
- Large-scale displacement has shattered millions of people's access to food, water, cash, fuel, health care, and other essential services. Blackouts, fuel scarcity, and a lack of supplies cause severe water shortages. Most of the country's health facilities are no longer operational, severely limiting millions of people's access to urgent medical services.

- There are soaring prices of food, fuel, and other essential goods, recurring disease outbreaks, pre-existing malnutrition, and acute food insecurity.
- Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North, SPLM-N (a militant group), has been sucked into the conflict among allies, proxies, and belligerents, further exacerbating the migration mitigation in Sudan.

To date, Sudan remains in a dire situation. The crisis goes beyond a mere civil war or humanitarian catastrophe; it raises fundamental questions about the viability and survival of the Sudanese state in the years ahead.

Conclusion

The combination of political instability, dysfunctional conflict, displacement, and humanitarian crises has devastated peace and economic development in Sudan. Looting of humanitarian warehouses, violence against aid workers, and attacks on humanitarian premises have hindered humanitarian responses, necessitating guarantees from involved parties to protect personnel and assets. In summary, the humanitarian situation is reaching a breaking point. Despite these challenges, partners assist affected civilians with first aid services, psychosocial support, and hospital medical supplies. Other ongoing efforts include remote protection monitoring and exploring modalities for food distribution to refugees.

Recommendations

Call to all parties:

- Inclusion of historicity of the conflict (unaddressed legacies) that runs decades back to be able to resolve old grievances that seem to defy peaceful measures but conform to the organic memory of a conflict
 - Ensure a comprehensive approach to the current crisis necessitates framing the conflict within a broader historical background to bring on board all interests.
 - Amplify and enhance women and youth representation in the peace process.
 - While addressing the root causes of the conflict, all the interests of visible and invisible actors will be negotiated, aiming at a win-win resolution with the inclusion of the Sudanese people.
 - Establish and implement viable commitments to protect civilians and foster a sustainable and lasting agreement to attain the elusive ceasefire.
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Call to international development partners to:

- Help in drawing the warring factions to the negotiating table with an undertaking to show commitment to the peace talks.
 - Create a concerted and purposeful approach to the peace process.
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Call to the UN agencies to:

- Increase their involvement in humanitarian and peace talks – UNICEF, IOM, UNSC, UNFPA, UNOCHA, UNHCR, UNDP, WFP, UN Women, and other Non-Resident UN agencies,
 - Hold conflicting parties accountable for including women and youth in the peace processes in line with UNSC Resolutions 1325 and 2250.
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Call to the AU and IGAD to:

- Review the expanded mechanism by AU to connect the disparate peace process and create a working coordination mechanism within which African, Arab, and Western actors can deliver in resolving the conflict.
- AU takes the driver's seat in the Sudan conflict peace process.

- Institute a new framework including subsidiary and complementarity principles to guide AU-RECs/RMs relations.
 - De-escalate the situation by creating a decisive, clear, and robust African-led initiative in response to the crisis. IGAD's leaders must fully recognize the limitations of the organization's remit or legal framework, often adopting bold initiatives outside its mandate.
 - IGAD member states to desist from directing their activities towards their interests, thus compromising its neutrality.
 - IGAD to institutionalize capacity and arm itself with authority to lead or manage the process delivered under its name.
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Call to foreign national governments to:

The US, UK, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Russia, China, Japan, Canada, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Morocco should re-evaluate their stakes in Sudan's economic and security sectors and chart new pathways to contribute to lasting peace in Sudan.

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About the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) promotes a world free of violence, inequality, and oppression. Guided by the Quaker belief in the divine light within each person, we nurture the seeds of change and respect for human life to fundamentally transform our societies and institutions. We work with people and partners worldwide of all faiths and backgrounds to meet urgent community needs, challenge injustice, and build peace. Through its Africa Regional Office in Kenya, AFSC promotes projects in Kenya, South Sudan, Somalia, Burundi, and Zimbabwe, with an evidence-based advocacy component for policy change in the Horn of Africa, with an office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. AFSC has decades of experience leading advocacy, evidence-based research, and worldwide civil society strengthening programs. AFSC brings Global South leaders and Civil Society Organizations through the Dialogue and Exchange Program to learn and exchange ideas every year. Due to the challenging situation in the Horn of Africa, AFSC focused intensely on this region to link up with existent civil society networks and Faith Leaders to contribute with its specific expertise.

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AACC-CETA

About the All Africa Conference of Churches, AACC:

The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) is a continental ecumenical body that accounts for over 140 million Christians across the continent. AACC is the largest association of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, and Indigenous Churches in Africa and is a member of the worldwide ecumenical network. AACC is a fellowship of 204 members comprising Churches, National Christian Councils (NCCs), Theological and Lay Training Institutions, and other Christian Organizations in 43 African Countries. AACC works through member Churches and with member Churches in the continent to address issues facing the people of the African continent. AACC also works with and collaborates with global ecumenical partners (in and out of Africa), multilateral bodies (African Union (AU), United Nations (UN) agencies, development agencies), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), foundations, private Businesses, etc. Through its AU Liaison Office, the AACC follows the ambition of its strategic plan for 2019-2023 for a solid political engagement at the AU level.

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