



Divided Sudan, Elusive Peace

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What's new? Control of Sudan is now divided between its army, which holds Khartoum and the east, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces in the west. Though diplomacy made strides in 2025, it appears stalled amid a row between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – and now the Middle East war.

Why does it matter? Sudan is home to the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Millions of Sudanese face starvation or famine. The state has largely collapsed, and Khartoum remains mostly uninhabitable. With Gulf and other regional powers backing opposing sides, the war risks further drawing in neighbours, including Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa's behemoth.

What should be done? While they may have little bandwidth for Sudan diplomacy at present, the outside actors best positioned to press for peace cannot let it slip off the agenda. Even as war wracks the Middle East, they should step up their efforts to end Sudan's conflict before all momentum is lost.

I. Overview

With the world's attention fixed on the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran, another conflict is raging in the Horn of Africa, not that far away. The Sudanese civil war is grinding on with no resolution in sight. For nearly three years, two branches of the military, the Sudanese army and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have fought bitterly for supremacy. Neither seems on the verge of achieving it. Control of the country is divided between them, and the risk of long-term partition is growing, with both sides naming governments staking claims to nationwide sovereignty in 2025. The war has compelled as many as four million Sudanese to flee the country, displaced many more internally and plunged several areas into prolonged hunger or famine. Foreign powers are complicit, backing opposing sides. A U.S. effort to marshal outside actors to press the conflict parties toward peace was struggling even before the Middle East war distracted them all. But they must not neglect the Sudan file; they need to find a way to manage their own differences so they can map an endgame for the war before it expands further past Sudan's borders.

Sudan's civil war broke out in April 2023, following a military takeover that removed a civilian cabinet working toward a democratic transition. The army and RSF had seized power together, but they soon came to blows, kicking off a protracted battle that has seen each side's fortunes wax and wane. The army and its affiliated government now hold the capital Khartoum; the central Nile River corridor; and the east, including strategic Port Sudan. The RSF dominates most of the western Darfur region, with supply routes from Chad and Libya. The main front lines between the sides lie at present in the west-central Kordofan region.

Throughout the conflict, peace efforts have been hampered by the fact that many of the foreign countries with influence over the belligerents have chosen to support one or the other. Due in part to this outside patronage, both the army and the RSF have rebuffed would-be mediators, believing instead that they can win by force of arms and attrition. Worse, the outside backers appear locked in an escalation cycle inside Sudan, hoping to outlast and overpower the other side. Sudan's African neighbours are also divided and increasingly entangled in the war. The conflict is already roiling nearby countries, with spillover effects apparent in Chad, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Yemen.

Amid these pernicious dynamics, the main mediation effort has been led by a group known as the Quad, which is headed by the United States and includes the three Arab powers with the most sway over the conflict parties – Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which back the army, and the UAE, which is the RSF's primary patron. In September 2025, these four countries agreed on a peace roadmap that envisages starting with a humanitarian truce before moving to a permanent ceasefire and talks about Sudan's political future. Yet hostilities have continued to intensify on the ground, and the army in particular has resisted the U.S. proposal, fearing that a truce would leave swathes of the country in the RSF's hands. Meanwhile, relations among the Quad powers have deteriorated over the past year, with rancour between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh bursting into the open in December after Saudi Arabia used its military to stop a campaign by UAE-backed forces in Yemen.

The U.S.-Israeli war with Iran – which rumbles on amid a 7 April ceasefire, a collapsed round of talks in Islamabad, and the U.S. announcement of a blockade on Iranian ports – is dominating the headlines, but it has not, at least yet, altered the big picture in Sudan. When the smoke clears, all indications are that the UAE and Saudi Arabia will be locked in a rivalry over competing regional visions whose effects have increasingly reverberated in the Red Sea basin and the Horn of Africa. By extension, they are unlikely to reduce their support for the opposing sides in the Sudanese war. Meanwhile, despite its preoccupation with the war in Iran – and the larger Middle East conflict that is shifting regional dynamics in ways that are not yet fully clear – Washington is still leading efforts to reach a ceasefire.

Moreover, it will likely continue to do so, unless the U.S. pivots away from its Sudan diplomacy or Middle Eastern, African or European powers displace it, which at present does not look imminent.

Yet years of lacklustre Washington-led diplomacy have produced disappointing results. Part of the problem has been a failure to bridge key disagreements between the UAE and Saudi Arabia (as well as Egypt). The September 2025 roadmap, for example, was a breakthrough as a basic framework for ending the war. Yet it also danced around core differences – including over the army’s political role, the RSF’s future and the knotty question of how to handle the resurgent influence of Sudan’s homegrown Islamist forces in post-conflict Sudan. The lack of common vision for the war’s endgame has undermined U.S. efforts to secure a humanitarian truce – which was meant to be the first step in bringing the roadmap to fruition. Even in the event of a temporary truce, which Washington is pushing to secure in the run-up to a mid-April Sudan conference in Berlin, those disagreements would likely stymie efforts to achieve a more durable peace.

What is clear is that if the U.S., its Arab partners or anyone else is to have the best shot at achieving success, they will have to tackle these thorny endgame questions sooner rather than later. The U.S. should use its political capital to try forging clearer agreement about Sudan’s “day after” among key outside players, especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE, and then work with them to push the conflict parties toward that off-ramp. Simultaneously, other diplomatic tracks should try to complement these efforts – leaders in the Horn of Africa could, for example, try to suss out how to coax the belligerents toward silencing the guns on either a short- or long-term basis, while other states and multilateral bodies work in other formats to advance conversations about Sudan’s post-conflict political order. A high-level effort to bring about a clearer modus vivendi between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi when it comes to their competition in the Red Sea basin and Horn of Africa would also be welcome; facilitators might include major regional actors, European security partners or, of course, the U.S.

After three years of brutal war, it is sobering that the options for peace-making in Sudan remain so limited – and so dependent on the diplomatic efforts of actors who have yet to deliver. If nothing else, perhaps the prospect of further instability in a region deeply unsettled by the new Middle East war will generate a new level of seriousness from the outside players most enmeshed in Sudan’s war to wind it down rather than escalate it. If not, the prospect of yet more tragic anniversaries looms over this war-ravaged country.

II. The Ebb and Flow of Battlefield Momentum

Sudan's civil war broke out three years ago, amid a power struggle among the military units that seized power after the fall of the Islamist-led authoritarian regime of Omar al-Bashir. In 2019, youth-driven protests helped topple Bashir, ushering in a civilian government – which entered an awkward power-sharing arrangement with both the army and RSF – that was to shepherd the country toward democratic elections. Two years later, the military branches dissolved the government and took power for themselves. But tensions soon built between army chief General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and his junta deputy, RSF leader General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, or “Hemedti”, who disagreed over whether the army should absorb the paramilitary into its ranks. In April 2023, their respective forces started fighting in Khartoum, with hostilities spreading quickly to central and western parts of the country.

The RSF kept the momentum during the war's first year. Its fighters rapidly seized most of Khartoum and its surrounds, causing its residents, including the country's professional class, to flee en masse. It launched offensives south east of the city, sacking swathes of Sudan's riverine heartland. In this period, the RSF also tightened its grip on much of its historical base in Darfur, which gave it a commercial lifeline to neighbours Chad, Libya and the Central African Republic, as well as firmer control of major gold deposits. African, Arab and Western diplomats, as well as independent investigations, also point to a second reason for the RSF's gains, namely the financial, military and logistical support it has received from its main patron, the UAE.¹ The UAE has reportedly kept up a steady supply of arms and other materiel to the RSF, at first primarily through eastern Chad, before spreading out the shipments across a broader set of routes.²

The Sudanese army, meanwhile, decamped to Port Sudan, the country's primary maritime gateway, setting it up as the de facto administrative capital. But it struggled to regroup on the battlefield, despite its air superiority.³

¹ Crisis Group interviews, 2023-2025. Many also see the close relations the UAE has forged with countries such as Chad, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan and Uganda, as well as with authorities in eastern Libya, Somaliland and Puntland, as a means of providing indirect support for the RSF. Since 2014, the UAE has been leveraging multi-billion-dollar investments and loans to increase its political and commercial influence in swathes of Africa.

² Early in the war, the RSF primarily relied on equipment reportedly sent by the UAE and arriving at Chadian airports at Amdjarass and Abéché, towns located near the Sudanese border.

³ For years before Bashir fell in 2019, the government had tasked paramilitaries and state-linked militias, including the RSF, with putting down rebellions. Tens of thousands of RSF soldiers also fought for Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. When the

To help its soldiers turn the tide, the army assembled a coalition of militias, employing a strategy the Sudanese army has used for decades. To this end, Burhan forged an alliance with former rebel groups from Darfur, known collectively as the Joint Forces, several of which had signed a peace agreement with the post-Bashir transitional government in 2020.⁴ Most of these groups had opposed both the regular army and the Darfuri Arab militias that have long formed the RSF's core. They tried to stay neutral at first when the two military branches went to war with each other. By late 2023, however, the most prominent groups, led by Darfur Governor Minni Minawi, had decided to align with the army and to mobilise Darfuri men to resist the RSF.

Further, the army raised popular and communal defence militias in central and northern Sudan. In doing so, it leaned heavily on its long-standing alliance with Islamist politicians and others affiliated with the old Bashir regime.⁵ Some of these groups are linked with the former ruling National Congress Party or the associated Sudanese Islamic Movement, a network run by senior figures tied to the former regime. The army also armed tribal militias to augment its sometimes meagre infantry divisions. What united these groups was animosity toward the RSF, which had sharpened after the paramilitary's rampant abuses in areas its fighters captured, ranging from widespread looting and killing to sexual violence, mostly against women and girls.⁶

In addition, Burhan corralled support from an array of outside powers, each with its own interests in Sudan, including Egypt, Eritrea, Türkiye, Qatar, Iran and, increasingly, Saudi Arabia, which at first had preferred to play the role of neutral mediator.⁷ Today, all these countries

civil war broke out, RSF fighters thus had more combat experience than the regular soldiers, as well as ready access to military-grade weaponry.

⁴ The peace agreement was signed in the South Sudanese capital Juba in October 2020. Key ex-rebel signatories included the Sudan Liberation Movement faction under Minni Minawi, the Justice and Equality Movement and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) faction under Malik Agar.

⁵ These groups include Sudan Shield, al-Baraa Ibn Malik Brigade and remnants of the Bashir-era Popular Defence Forces and National Intelligence and Security Services operations division, as well as informal communal defence militias from rural areas, especially Kordofan.

⁶ Foreign governments, as well as international human rights groups, have documented abuses by both the RSF and army. See, for example, "Sudan 2023 Human Rights Report", U.S. Department of State, 22 April 2024.

⁷ Like the RSF's patron the UAE, several of these countries have business interests in Sudan, ranging from investments in farmland, livestock and gold and other minerals to access to Red Sea ports. Some had costly land leases before the war. Other interests are more strategic than pecuniary. Egypt sees the army as a better partner in managing its interests in the Nile basin and maintaining stability on its southern border. Türkiye's approach is shaped by its ties to Islamist factions in the army's coalition, as well as a desire to expand its footprint in the Red Sea region and its competition with the UAE there. Turkish officials often claim that Abu Dhabi coordinates some of its regional activities with Israel. Iran has mainly supplied drones to the army, while Saudi Arabia seems to have strengthened its en-

recognise Burhan as Sudan's head of state, as do the UN, the Arab League and the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Horn of Africa's regional bloc. Most of Burhan's backers frame their support for the army and its government as helping Sudan put down an internal rebellion. Some chose sides partly as a way of providing a counterweight to the UAE's sponsorship of the RSF.

Sudan's war has also unfolded amid a scramble for influence in the Horn of Africa. The country boasts a long Red Sea shoreline and sits at a crossroads linking the Horn with North Africa and the Mediterranean basin. External powers that seek to guide its post-war direction could view pouring in weaponry and financing for the belligerents as advancing that goal. Turbulence in the Middle East has only made outsiders keener on attaining greater sway in the region. Israel's late December 2025 recognition of Somaliland – which Saudi Arabia and Egypt strongly opposed – was an augury of the shadow game among rival countries trying to establish a firmer foothold. In these circumstances, Sudan's civil war has gradually become a stage for indirect competition among foreign capitals with overlapping or clashing agendas, with all of them trying to shape the conflict's trajectory.

Still, despite occasional tactical gains, none of the parties has managed to secure a decisive advantage. In the second half of 2024, the army and its disparate coalition made their first significant gains on the battlefield, aided by new drone capabilities.⁸ By March 2025, they had pushed the RSF out of Khartoum and its bases east of the Nile. The recapture of the capital proved a turning point in the war.⁹ It bolstered the army's claim to be Sudan's legitimate government, even if the country's western regions remained out of reach. The army's offensive forced much of the RSF to retreat to Darfur. The front shifted west to El Fasher, the army's last bastion in North Darfur, which the RSF had been besieging for over a year, as well as to Kordofan. But the army's advance soon stalled once more.

gement since the RSF launched drone attacks in 2025 on locations near areas that it considers important to its national security, such as Port Sudan and the Red Sea coast. (Saudi officials signed several business and cooperation agreements with authorities in Port Sudan in 2025, adding to Riyadh's portfolio of ventures in the country.) The army also forged a strong partnership with Eritrea, which has trained militias as a way to secure its western border and deter an RSF advance farther east. Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior officials in army-led government, October-November 2024, February-June 2025; and Crisis Group interviews, senior officials in African, Arab and Western capitals, 2024-2025.

⁸ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°204, *Sudan's Calamitous War: Finding a Path toward Peace*, 21 January 2025. The army uses state-supplied drones from countries like Iran and Türkiye for surveillance and airstrikes. The RSF has also acquired long-range strategic drones. Both the army and RSF use commercial and modified suicide drones, mostly from China. The army has also started manufacturing its own drones.

⁹ Crisis Group Statement, "Battle for Khartoum Marks a Crossroads in Sudan's Civil War", 21 February 2025.

The pendulum then swung back toward the RSF, buoyed by the UAE's support.¹⁰ In May 2025, the RSF began launching long-range drone attacks on targets in eastern Sudan, from Port Sudan and Kassala to critical oil depots and Khartoum's airport.¹¹ These surprise attacks not only escalated the war but also enraged nearby countries, especially Saudi Arabia, which sits across the Red Sea from Port Sudan, and Egypt, which shares a 1,200km border with Sudan. At the same time, the RSF went on the offensive to consolidate its control of Darfur, capturing the tri-border region linking Sudan with Egypt and Libya. With this manoeuvre, it acquired a more direct supply route from southern Libya, helping it ease its reliance on eastern Chad as the main conduit for weapons deliveries.¹²

In October 2025, the RSF captured El Fasher after a roughly eighteen-month siege.¹³ The RSF had surrounded the city in mid-2024, blocking aid deliveries and subsequently constructing an earthen berm to hinder movement. It also stepped up drone and artillery strikes, including on mosques, hospitals and displacement camps, killing or maiming hundreds of civilians. When the RSF finally decided to overrun the city, its fighters slaughtered thousands of residents, looted businesses and destroyed buildings, at times filming their actions triumphantly with their mobile phones. Particularly egregious was the reported killing of 460 patients and others at the al-Saudi Maternity Hospital.¹⁴ Torture, abductions and sexual violence were also documented by Sudanese and international human rights organisations, as well as by a UN fact-finding commission, which called them "indicators of a genocidal path".¹⁵ These atrocities brought a surge of negative coverage of the UAE's support for the RSF, including in the Arab media.¹⁶

¹⁰ See, for example, "Sudan: Advanced Chinese Weaponry Provided by UAE Identified in Breach of Arms Embargo – New Investigation", Amnesty International, 8 May 2025.

¹¹ The drones appear to be piloted from RSF-controlled territory (such as an air base in Nyala, South Darfur) and include models capable of flying thousands of kilometres to their targets. Following the drone attacks, the authorities in Port Sudan, with external assistance, appear to have improved their air defences.

¹² Shewit Woldemichael, "Capture of Tri-border Area Marks Another Twist in Sudan's Civil War", Crisis Group Analyst's Notebook, 20 June 2025. See also "How we found an RSF military camp in the Libyan desert", Centre for Information Resilience, 31 July 2025.

¹³ Crisis Group Statement, "After El Fasher: Ending Sudan's Atrocious War", 14 November 2025.

¹⁴ "Sudan: UN experts appalled by reports of mass atrocities, unlawful killings and sexual violence in El Fasher", UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 7 November 2025.

¹⁵ "Sudan: Hallmarks of Genocide in El Fasher – Report of the Independent Fact-finding Commission for the Sudan" (advance unedited version), UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 19 February 2026.

¹⁶ See, for example, Tobi Raji, "The UAE faces growing outrage over support for paramilitary in Sudan", *Washington Post*, 15 November 2025; "Sudan slams RSF 'war crimes' in El Fasher as survivors recount killings", Al Jazeera, 3 November 2025.

Following El Fasher's fall, the army now controls most of central, eastern and northern Sudan, while the RSF and its allies dominate the west and parts of the south. The main battlefield has shifted to Kordofan, roughly in the middle-west of the country, which is wedged between the warring parties' strongholds. The army aims to push the RSF out of Kordofan, so that, eventually, it can try to recapture Darfur.¹⁷ For its part, the RSF wants to move eastward through Kordofan so that it can once again threaten Khartoum and the Nile valley. It also hopes to put pressure on these areas from the west through recent gains in southern Blue Nile state, which borders South Sudan and Ethiopia.

III. Unstable Partition amid Devastation

If the war settles into a stalemate along a front in Kordofan, Sudan's division might become entrenched, with the country split roughly in two. Yet the continued fighting and the heightened regional competition for influence in Sudan suggest that the conflict is unlikely to peter out along a stable partition line any time soon.

Meanwhile, political developments are also dividing the country. In May 2025, Burhan appointed former diplomat Kamil al-Taib Idris as prime minister of the army-affiliated government in Port Sudan. Idris, the first civilian to hold the post since the 2022 coup, unveiled a 22-member cabinet composed of technocrats, allied militia leaders and army-aligned civilians, including Islamist figures, reflecting the army's effort to accommodate the range of groups supporting its war effort. The cabinet includes two women. Though Idris has pledged to maintain independence from the military, in practice his authority is limited by the army's oversight and by a constitutional framework that concentrates power in the high command. At present, the government is attempting to return to Khartoum, where it is reopening ministries.

Three months after Idris announced his cabinet, the RSF and its allies swore in a widely unrecognised government of their own in Nyala, capital of South Darfur, naming Hemedti as chair of a Presidential Council and Mohammed Hassan al-Ta'ishi, a politician who hails from a small Darfuri Arab community, as prime minister at the helm of a cabinet.¹⁸ This move followed the RSF's formation of a broader political coalition, known as Tasees, in Nairobi in February 2025. Tasees includes other rebel groups and figures, most prominently the Sudan

2025; and "What Does the Fall of El Fasher Mean for Sudan?", Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 4 November 2025

¹⁷ Crisis Group telephone interviews, members of army-aligned government, September-November 2025.

¹⁸ Shewit Woldemichael, "Sudan's RSF Proclaims Parallel Government, Raising Threat of Partition", Crisis Group Analyst's Notebook, 30 August 2025.

People's Liberation Movement-North under Abdelaziz Al-Hilu.¹⁹ Despite the fanfare around its creation, the RSF's ostensible government is largely inoperable, as most of its officials reside outside Sudan. No government or international organisation has officially recognised it, and many (including the African Union) have rejected it outright.

Yet little suggests that either side is content to focus on ruling the area under its dominion. Instead, the Sudanese army, backed by its foreign allies, has continued to launch offensives in Kordofan, helped by new drone capacity, and has previously declared its intent to push onward into Darfur.²⁰ Meanwhile, the RSF is still seeking to advance through Kordofan to the Nile valley. It is also trying to widen a new front in the south east, in Blue Nile state, jutting between the borders with South Sudan and Ethiopia. In February, Hemedti asserted that the RSF had a duty to its "martyrs" to return to Khartoum.²¹

Among the risks that the fighting presents is that it could further draw in other countries in the Horn of Africa, with Ethiopia seemingly weighing in more heavily on the RSF's side against the army, which is backed by Ethiopia's main adversaries, Egypt and Eritrea.²² The worsening relations between Ethiopia and the Sudanese military risk further destabilising both sides of the border by escalating proxy dynamics.²³ Meanwhile, many of the countries supporting the Sudanese army have rallied behind Eritrea in its dispute with Ethiopia, which has the backing of the UAE. Fierce antagonism between Ethiopia and Egypt, with Egypt opposing Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile as well as its desire to regain a foothold on the Red Sea, exacerbates regional rifts. Should renewed conflict break out between Ethiopia and Eritrea, or in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, that

¹⁹ The SPLM-N has its origins in South Sudan's ruling party, the SPLM, which fought a civil war with the Khartoum government from 1983 to 2005. The 2005 peace deal led to South Sudan's independence in 2011, but left SPLM elements in parts of Sudan, mostly in the Nuba mountains in South Kordofan and southern Blue Nile state. The SPLM-N has controlled swathes of these areas since South Sudan seceded and was often in direct conflict with the Sudanese army before the current war. In 2017, the SPLM-N split into two factions – one led by al-Hilu and the other by Malik Agar. Agar's faction signed the 2020 peace agreement with the transitional government, while al-Hilu's continued its rebellion. Agar is now Burhan's deputy in the army-led Sovereignty Council.

²⁰ "Fatal drone strikes on civilians persist in Sudan's Kordofan, UN says", Reuters, 9 February 2026.

²¹ "Dagalo's full speech in the Ugandan capital Kampala", video, YouTube, 20 February 2026 [Arabic].

²² Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese army and intelligence officers, December 2025-February 2026. See also "Ethiopia builds secret camp to train Sudan RSF fighters, sources say", Reuters, 10 February 2026.

²³ Alan Boswell, "As Tensions Mount, Sudan Accuses Ethiopia of New Hostilities", Crisis Group Analyst's Notebook, 4 March 2026.

could in turn escalate the war in Sudan as rivals ramp up their jockeying for regional dominance.²⁴

Meanwhile, the conflict continues to be devastating for Sudan's civilian population. There are no reliable casualty figures for the war. Some 14 million have been displaced, including some four million refugees who often live in difficult conditions in neighbouring countries like Chad, South Sudan and Egypt.²⁵ Humanitarian conditions are the worst in the world, with several pockets of famine.²⁶ Overall, more than 20 million Sudanese, nearly half the population, are classified as acutely food-insecure.

The conflict has affected men and women in different ways. Women and girls have faced widespread sexual and gender-based violence, including rape, sexual exploitation and forced labour.²⁷ The destruction of health care facilities and restrictions on movement due to insecurity have severely undermined access to maternal and reproductive health services, placing pregnant women and new mothers at heightened risk. Men, on the other hand, are often targeted for killing, torture, disappearance, arbitrary detention and forced recruitment by armed groups and militias, particularly in areas of active fighting or contested control.

IV. Flagging Peace Efforts

A. Resisting Peace

Since Sudan's civil war broke out in 2023, the warring parties have had vastly different positions about how it should end and what should happen to Sudan afterward. This gap has hobbled peace negotiations, as has the army's resistance to speaking directly with RSF leaders.

There is still stiff resistance to serious peace talks within each camp. As for Burhan, he faces opposition to the idea from various sides. First, many Sudanese (including those from Khartoum and other areas where the army enjoys significant support) despise the RSF, which they view as a heinous proxy of an external power, the UAE, that they blame for their country's destruction. To them, the idea of talking with the paramilitary is anathema. Secondly, the army continues to rely on its alli-

²⁴ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°210, *Ethiopia, Eritrea and Tigray: A Powder Keg in the Horn of Africa*, 18 February 2026.

²⁵ "Four million people have fled Sudan since 2023, warns UNHCR", InfoMigrants, 5 June 2025.

²⁶ "Sudan: Famine threshold for acute malnutrition surpassed in two more North Darfur localities, crisis worsening in Greater Kordofan", ReliefWeb, 5 February 2026.

²⁷ Women also face increased caregiving and economic burdens amid displacement and separation of families, as many have been forced to take on non-traditional roles as heads of household following the death, detention or recruitment of male relatives.

ance with anti-RSF Darfuri militias, which have helped it retake Khartoum and fight in Kordofan, and are still harrying the RSF in Darfur. Those groups, heavily composed of non-Arab fighters, fear a truce that would leave Darfur in the RSF's grip and their communities vulnerable to its reprisals.

Lastly, the anti-RSF Islamist militias and powerful Islamist figures from the Bashir regime are also leery of peace talks, especially those led by the Quad. They worry that any new army-RSF pact or civilian government brokered by the U.S., which has designated the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood as a foreign terrorist organisation, would again exclude them from political authority and crack down on their networks.²⁸ While there is no major self-identifying Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood chapter, the U.S. has described the Sudanese Islamic Movement as such. It regards the Islamic Movement, led by Ali Karti, a former foreign minister under Bashir, as the Brotherhood's political wing in Sudan, and the al-Baraa militia, which fights alongside the Sudanese army and has a major social media presence, as its armed wing.²⁹ These groups are a pillar of Burhan's wartime coalition.

Amid this resistance, Burhan's government has promoted a proposal for ending the war on its own terms. This plan, which it presented to the UN Security Council, calls for the RSF's full unilateral withdrawal to cantonment camps for disarmament, followed by a national dialogue. It is not a promising basis for negotiations. Indeed, on the RSF side, there is little apparent appetite for major concessions, whether unilateral withdrawal, disarmament or absorption into the army. The RSF's political coalition instead demands an end to the army's political role, a new civilian government, the creation of a new national army (in which it would participate) and a new federal system that provides significant regional autonomy from the national government. It also wants Islamists out of politics.

Though the RSF has been more open to peace talks than the army, it has rejected formats that recognise Burhan as Sudan's leader and his administration as Sudan's government – a precondition Burhan has insisted upon in previous mediation attempts. Hemedti has long harboured ambitions to rule Sudan and is likely to keep resisting any effort to dismantle the forces and commercial empire that undergird his political power.³⁰

²⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior Islamist figures associated with Bashir's National Congress Party and the Sudanese Islamic Movement, as well as others who identify as Islamists but were not part of the Bashir government, March 2026. "Press Statement: Terrorist Designation of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood", U.S. Department of State, 9 March 2026.

²⁹ "Fact Sheet: Designation of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood", U.S. Department of State, 9 March 2026.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, RSF officials and RSF political allies, 2024-2025. A prominent RSF ally said Hemedti still aspires to be Sudan's president.

A question concerning both sides is whether they would change their positions if they came under significant pressure from their main patrons. The RSF is especially susceptible, given its heavy reliance on one sponsor, the UAE. If Abu Dhabi throttles back its support, or if it begins struggling to get weapons and equipment into western Sudan, the RSF's calculations could shift. While Burhan and his coalition also receive external support and are thus vulnerable to pressure from outside actors, they are less dependent on a single supplier and face fewer logistical obstacles in importing arms, given their bases on the Red Sea.

B. *Enter the Quad*

Given the chasm between the two sides and the deep involvement of outsiders, diplomacy has resorted to an “outside-in” approach that tries to align the key external players behind ways to end the war and then asks them to persuade the parties to follow suit. Right now, the primary vehicle for these efforts is the Quad – the U.S., Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. The Quad was established informally in 2024, under then-President Joe Biden's special envoy, Tom Perriello, but it has taken on greater importance under President Donald Trump. By mid-2025, the Trump administration had made the Quad talks the core of its Sudan diplomacy, driven chiefly by Massad Boulos, a member of the extended Trump family and a senior adviser focused on Africa and Arab issues at the State Department. On 12 September 2025, after months of U.S.-led dialogue, the Quad proposed its roadmap to peace.³¹ The plan called for a three-month humanitarian truce, followed by a permanent ceasefire and a nine-month transition to a civilian-led government, alongside an immediate halt to outside military support.

The Quad's roadmap has yet to get off the ground, however, and if it is not revived it could become a dead letter. The Sudanese army appears to have rejected the plan, though at times it has equivocated under pressure from Saudi Arabia and Egypt. As noted, key Burhan allies strongly oppose either a humanitarian truce or peace talks. They see the UAE as a party to the conflict – not one that should be participating in the Quad.³² The RSF eventually endorsed the full roadmap but only, as discussed below, after it was clear that the army had no interest in it.

³¹ “Joint Statement on Restoring Peace and Security in Sudan”, U.S. Department of State, 12 September 2025.

³² Crisis Group telephone interviews, Darfuri armed group leaders, National Congress Party members and pro-army political party representatives, September 2025-January 2026.

Complicating matters further is that in reaching putative consensus about the roadmap the Quad members papered over their own significant differences. Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which both back the army, are seeking an important role for it in a post-war transitional period. They frame the army as a state institution critical for preventing total state collapse and disorder in Sudan, and in the roadmap discussions they accordingly supported a sequence of events starting with a cease-fire. Broader political talks, they said, would come after the army had finished its negotiations with the RSF, with the expectation that these could take some time. Riyadh and Cairo also take issue with characterisations – including in the roadmap – that appear to put the two warring parties on an equal footing. In contrast, they contend that Sudan's war pits a government against a rogue militia.

For its part, the UAE wants to quickly displace the army's rule. Thus, it pushed in roadmap talks for any truce to be followed by an immediate intra-Sudanese dialogue aimed at forming a new civilian government concurrent with army-RSF negotiations over a more enduring cease-fire. Emirati officials envisage that pro-RSF and other UAE-friendly civilians would be part of that dialogue and thus part of a future civilian government. In negotiating the roadmap, the UAE also argued for short timelines so that the army could not ensconce its rule by dragging out the negotiations indefinitely.³³

Against this backdrop, the roadmap document was a compromise driven by the U.S. that refrained from dealing with sticky issues, such as how Sudan would be reunified and what the army and RSF's future roles would be. Thus, according to Quad officials and other diplomats, neither side was completely satisfied with the September text.³⁴ As a result, the U.S. has had great difficulty persuading its Quad partners and others to turn the roadmap into something more than words on paper. At the UN General Assembly in September 2025, the group could not agree on a new joint statement focused on lifting the RSF siege on El Fasher. In late October, Washington held indirect discussions involving all the Quad countries and both the Sudanese belligerents. These contacts marked modest progress, given that there had been no public peace talks since 2023. But they, too, ended without a meaningful output.

Events on the ground soon overtook diplomacy. The furor over the atrocities accompanying El Fasher's fall in late October led Saudi Arabia and Egypt to ease diplomatic pressure on Burhan to agree to an immediate truce, while backers like Egypt and Türkiye appeared to double down on their military support for the army. Emboldened,

³³ Crisis Group interviews, senior Emirati officials, Abu Dhabi, Doha and New York, September and December 2025.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Washington and New York, 2025.

Burhan dismissed the proposed roadmap, saying it aimed to disband the army and calling it biased due to the UAE's participation.³⁵ After the capture of El Fasher, the RSF publicly endorsed the proposal, but the army had already rejected it, and in any case the RSF made no move to unilaterally halt fighting.³⁶ Fundamentally, both warring parties seemed to believe that a fresh influx of armaments could turn the tide in their favour.

C. *The Hadramawt Episode*

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's mid-November visit to the White House briefly appeared to give peace efforts a shot in the arm. President Trump said afterward that the Saudi leader had raised the war in Sudan and asked for U.S. engagement in efforts to end it. Trump said he had promised to help.³⁷

Soon thereafter, however, a rift between Saudi Arabia and the UAE cast a shadow over the roadmap negotiations. In December, UAE-backed separatist forces affiliated with Yemen's Southern Transitional Council (STC) launched a surprise offensive in Hadramawt, a governorate in eastern Yemen that abuts Saudi Arabia and whose population has close ties with people across the border. The move infuriated Riyadh. After more than three weeks of negotiations with the UAE and Yemeni parties, Saudi Arabia bombed Emirati ships, accusing them of carrying arms to the STC (something the UAE denies) and joined the Yemeni government's demand for a full withdrawal of Emirati forces from Yemen. Meanwhile, Hadrami and other fighters backed by Saudi airstrikes drove the STC out of Hadramawt and its positions in southern Yemen.

While the UAE took steps to de-escalate the Yemen dispute – declaring that it would remove its forces from the country and then doing so – the rift lingers. Saudi-linked media accuse the UAE of destabilising the entire Red Sea basin (including Sudan), and Saudi officials say they seek to enforce “red lines” near the kingdom's land and maritime borders.³⁸ Emirati officials paint their larger neighbour as suffering

³⁵ “Sudan army chief rejects the Quad's truce proposal, citing UAE role”, Al Jazeera, 24 November 2025.

³⁶ Hemedti accepted the Quad peace plan a day after Burhan openly rejected it. “RSF agrees to Quad-proposed humanitarian truce”, *Sudan Tribune*, 6 November 2025; “Sudan's RSF paramilitaries agree humanitarian ceasefire”, BBC, 6 November 2025.

³⁷ It is unclear what Trump meant by this pledge. Some U.S. officials say they have seen no sign of his personal involvement, while others say he speaks about Sudan to the Arab leaders in the Quad. Crisis Group interviews, November 2025-January 2026.

³⁸ In a session chaired by King Salman, Saudi Arabia demanded that the UAE withdraw its forces from Yemen within 24 hours. *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 30 December 2025.

from “big brother” complex and seeking to exercise hegemony over the smaller Gulf Arab states.³⁹

Senior Gulf officials told Crisis Group that they see the Yemen fracas as an outgrowth of tensions over Sudan. They believe that the UAE backed the STC offensive in Hadramawt as a calculated act of retaliation for the Saudi crown prince’s plea for Trump’s intercession in the Sudanese conflict.⁴⁰ These officials also say Abu Dhabi thinks that the crown prince asked Trump to level sanctions at RSF backers, namely the UAE. Saudi officials strenuously deny that they asked for U.S. action against the UAE, however, while Emirati officials insist they were not behind the STC offensive (despite being the STC’s patron) and dismiss the idea that the Hadramawt episode was related to Sudan.

The new Middle East war has pushed intra-Gulf disputes to the side for the time being, but the ill feeling between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi persists and is likely to continue manifesting in the Horn of Africa.⁴¹

D. *Distracted Diplomacy*

Since 28 February, the U.S. and Israeli campaign against Iran has distracted Quad members from Sudan diplomacy, though some work continues. Up until that point, however, the Trump administration appeared to be trying to continue its diplomatic push through the Quad, notwithstanding the tensions between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

U.S. efforts focused on two texts: a broad framework document, reportedly modelled in part after the Trump administration’s twenty-point Gaza deal; and a 90-day humanitarian truce proposal, negotiated within the Quad but yet to be agreed upon by the Sudanese belligerents. The framework document is organised around five pillars: a humanitarian truce (which would primarily serve to temporarily halt fighting and create space for the remaining four pillars); unfettered humanitarian access; a ceasefire; a political process leading to a civilian-led government; and post-conflict reconstruction and recovery.⁴²

But making any progress at all proved challenging, with the parties jockeying for position with respect to “endgame” issues. As a condition for coming to the table, the army wanted guarantees that it would regain sovereignty over all of Sudanese territory and that the UAE would stop supporting the RSF. The RSF was more willing to negotiate but rejected making the major concessions demanded by the army

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, UAE experts and officials, Abu Dhabi, January 2026.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Saudi, Qatari and U.S. officials, Riyadh and Doha, December 2025-February 2026.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, Saudi and African officials, Riyadh, January 2026.

⁴² Massad Boulos remarks to the UN Security Council briefing on Sudan, 19 February 2026.

(such as territorial withdrawal) as a precondition for either a truce or talks. It planned to use its territorial control as leverage to demand major changes to the Sudanese state, government and military.

The U.S. sought to get around the obstacles by proposing limited RSF withdrawals, namely from portions of North Darfur, including El Fasher, and Kordofan region, as part of the humanitarian truce.⁴³ While senior RSF officials say they reject this idea, the U.S. believes it has finally gained the paramilitary's acceptance, possibly with a plan to swap out its military units for police or other less overtly militarised ones, though the RSF also wants the army to commit to doing the same in at least some areas under its control.⁴⁴ As of early April, Boulos was still pressing Burhan to agree as well, but there was no sign that the latter was eager to do so (as it fell short of the army's ambitious demands) or was feeling pressure to fall in line from his major backers, who are all preoccupied with the Middle East war though they still consider Sudan a major priority.⁴⁵

Thus, it seems that the most likely near-term trajectory is that diplomacy will remain slowed even as Sudan's civil war continues, with even less external pressure on the parties to curb their belligerency. In time, there will be important questions to ask about whether relations among Quad members have improved or deteriorated during the course of the Middle East war, as well as whether this group – under U.S. leadership – is still best positioned to lead on Sudan diplomacy. At present, however, it still appears to be the most viable option.

V. A Search for Peace in Uncertain Times

Three years into Sudan's devastating civil war, prospects for a negotiated settlement remain dim. The army refuses to talk to the RSF, while both parties still appear to believe that their outside backing puts them in a position to win a war of attrition. The sharp discord between Saudi Arabia and the UAE has undercut the momentum that started building in 2025 within the U.S.-led Quad format. Horn of Africa dynamics are also trending in the wrong direction, with rivals Ethiopia and Eritrea migrating toward opposite sides of the Sudan war, in a way that suggests a new war between the powerful

⁴³ "Declaration of a Nationwide Truce for Sudan", working draft, 17 February 2026. On file with Crisis Group. While the proposal did not include a commitment to work toward a permanent ceasefire, it did provide for the humanitarian truce to roll over every 30 days and describes "potential" ceasefire talks as a discussion point for the parties.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, senior RSF officials; official with knowledge of U.S. negotiations; and others in touch with U.S. officials, March 2026.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese officials and independent analysts, March 2026.

Horn neighbours could spill over into Sudan. Until it has been resolved, the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran seems likely to retard and possibly suspend high-level regional diplomacy on Sudan for the foreseeable future.

But neither fatalism nor distraction is an excuse for allowing Sudan's war to disappear from the international agenda, particularly since it shows no sign of burning out on its own. The war is too big, cruel and geopolitically important to be allowed to rage indefinitely, without a serious international effort to bring it to a close. Even if diplomacy is temporarily hindered, the time is right to take stock of where diplomatic efforts stand and where they might go next.

A. Looking for a Landing Zone

First comes the question of which diplomatic format makes sense. As noted, for all the difficult dynamics described above, the Quad remains the leading forum for reaching a ceasefire in Sudan as well as the group of actors best positioned to bring the war to an enduring end.

As has been the case since Sudan's civil war began three years ago, if the U.S. wants to be effective diplomatically, it will need to intensify its efforts and put more political capital on the line. It remains unlikely that the two Sudanese parties will bridge the gaps between them without urging from their outside backers, and it is likewise improbable that the outside backers will apply that pressure without narrowing their own differences first, which may well require more senior-level diplomacy from Washington. Boulos, by many accounts, deserves credit for leading the negotiations that led to the September 2025 roadmap, the first indirect talks between the two parties in nearly two years and dogged pursuit of a humanitarian truce. His continued engagement would likely be constructive. Yet, given the divergences that remain, the personal involvement of Trump or another top-level experienced official from his foreign policy inner circle, perhaps Secretary of State Marco Rubio, could prove essential for breaking the logjam in the Quad, particularly between Riyadh and Cairo, on one side, and Abu Dhabi and the other.

In terms of what U.S. priorities should be, Washington may need to do more legwork to supplement its effort to secure a humanitarian truce, which could remain stuck absent headway on longer-term political and security arrangements. Even if the U.S. does manage – against all odds – to force through a truce in the short term, the belligerents would clearly struggle to come to a durable ceasefire, much less a lasting peace, without a stronger steer from key regional players. Thus, it may make sense to redouble efforts at the highest levels to work out a landing zone that all Quad members can genuinely live with and all agree is better than the bloody status quo.

Finding a workable middle ground among those outside players has long proven a challenge. It would require Abu Dhabi, on one side, and Riyadh and Cairo on the other, to acknowledge that none of them will fully get their way in Sudan. The three Arab powers could, however, agree to work together on the contours of a deal that would give each of them essential assurances.

For Saudi Arabia and Egypt, that could mean, at minimum, a contained and curtailed RSF that does not threaten Khartoum or eastern Sudan – or retain the ability to split Sudan in two. This condition will probably require an Emirati commitment to hold the RSF to future deadlines for withdrawing, integrating, demobilising or expatriating its fighters.

The UAE, meanwhile, would seek clear guarantees that the Sudanese army and security apparatus will distance itself from the Bashir-linked Sudanese Islamic Movement, including through rebalancing in the officer corps and the demobilisation of militias, while recognising that some Islamists will invariably retain influence. Agreement to back formation of a unity civilian government will also be essential, so that neither Egypt nor Saudi Arabia is faced with a failed state, and so that Abu Dhabi has authorities to deal with besides the Sudanese army.

If the Quad's Arab powers can come together on these broad principles, the next step would be for the latter to press the Sudanese warring parties to agree to this framework and push them into direct or indirect negotiations over remaining details for a durable ceasefire. Ideally, such talks would be complemented by an immediate humanitarian truce along the lines the U.S. has been proposing and a suspension of arms flows, which the U.S. would commit to keeping tabs on. The U.S. and Saudi Arabia would also need to coordinate with other key backers of the Sudanese army, including Egypt, Qatar and Türkiye, to ensure a united front of concerned states working toward the same objective. Some of these supporters, especially Qatar and Türkiye, may need to help broker dialogue with Sudan's powerful Islamist figures, to address their own opposition to ceasefire negotiations.

Given the intense regional acrimony the Sudan war has unleashed, progress on the Sudan question may need to be part of a wider thaw between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, whether brought about through Washington's good offices or perhaps those of another facilitator as suggested below. Such a warming might in turn benefit from the articulation of red lines that each would commit to respect. For Saudi Arabia, that would likely include proscribing overt or covert UAE involvement in military action near its land or sea borders, including on the African shores of the Red Sea. Clear past examples of crossing that red line might include the May 2025 drone attacks on Port Sudan,

which regional actors blamed on the UAE.⁴⁶ It would also include any UAE-backed Ethiopian attempt to seize the Eritrean port of Assab, something many fear Addis Ababa might try in the future. The UAE could make clear that lobbying for coercive measures against it, as it believes Riyadh did in the White House meeting between Trump and the crown prince in late 2025, is out of bounds.

B. Backstopping U.S. Diplomacy

The U.S. is an imperfect choice to be at the helm of Sudan peace efforts. It seems likely that Washington's relationships in the Red Sea basin and the Gulf will survive the war it has launched with Iran – among other things, states that have relied on the U.S. for years as their primary security partner may have no better option – but it is hard to know for sure what they will look like. Perhaps more importantly, the U.S. has yet to show willingness to use the leverage that ending the war in Sudan is likely to require.

While there are regrettably few fallback options, there are steps that other states could take that might aid peace efforts in Sudan, many of which will also have to wait until the new Middle East war has run its course. For example, Gulf states could resume working independently of Washington to try repairing relations between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, with a focus on finding a way forward on Sudan. Renewed top-level contact between Saudi and Emirati leaders concerning the Iran crisis might create openings. European powers, some of which are now forging stronger security links with Gulf countries, could also help push Saudi Arabia and the UAE toward such a resolution, as could other influential players, such as Egypt and Türkiye. The goal would be for Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Cairo and/or others to re-establish a quiet channel for direct or indirect negotiations between the Sudanese army and the RSF, as last occurred in Manama, Bahrain in early 2024.⁴⁷

Given the tattered state of diplomacy, no route toward ending the war should be left unexplored. Horn of Africa leaders, despite their differences, should rekindle their own early efforts to bring Burhan and

⁴⁶ Arab, African and Western officials think the UAE supplied the long-range drones to the RSF. Crisis Group interviews, 2025. Regional officials also widely believe that the RSF would not launch such a sensitive new front against Emirati wishes. Crisis Group interviews, 2025. The May 2025 attacks infuriated Saudi officials. Crisis Group interviews, Riyadh, May 2025.

⁴⁷ The Manama talks, which were secret at the time, brought together key deputies of Burhan and Hemedti to negotiate a framework for ending the war. Burhan was represented by General Shams El Din Kabbashi and Hemedti by his powerful brother, General Abdulrahim Hamdan Dagalo. Representatives of the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. were also present. The talks resulted in a signed declaration of principles in January 2024. "Principles and Foundations of a Comprehensive Solution to the Sudanese Crisis", 20 January 2024. On file with Crisis Group. Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese, U.S. and Arab officials, 2024. Burhan pulled out of the talks once news of them leaked.

Hemedti together for high-level talks. They last made such an attempt in late 2023, under IGAD auspices, but the meeting fell through at the last minute, with Burhan later pulling Sudan out of the bloc.⁴⁸ Still, Sudan rejoined IGAD in 2026, raising the prospect of a new push. If they work together, African heads of state have the convening power to bring both belligerents to the table. Djibouti, IGAD's current chair, is close to Burhan, while Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda have warm relations with Hemedti. While the Quad's Arab leaders work at their level to narrow their differences over Sudan's end state, the African leaders could use this parallel track to sound out the parties on what it might take for them to agree to a truce in line with the Quad's roadmap, which IGAD and the African Union (AU) have already endorsed.

Diplomats in both formats would also need to give thought to challenges in the event of a breakthrough that stops the fighting. First will be enforcing and monitoring any humanitarian truce or more enduring ceasefire, especially given the numerous allied militias on both sides that would also need to comply. Both parties would need to commit to responsibility for the actions of these armed groups. Monitoring teams would probably need to include representatives of both belligerents, as well as outside experts, such as from the UN or AU.

The next step would be to tackle the intra-Sudanese political process that would come next under the Quad roadmap. Washington looks like it is strengthening coordination with the European Union, which together with the UN, the AU, IGAD and the Arab League, aim to facilitate civilian political dialogue through a separate grouping of multilateral institutions on Sudan known as the Quintet.⁴⁹ Swiss diplomats have also hosted meetings between opposing political factions, while Egypt, Norway, the UK and Qatar have all also sought to help get intra-Sudanese discussions going.

Making sure these efforts complement one another should be a priority at Europe's third annual Sudan conference in Berlin on 15 April, which for the first time will be co-hosted with the U.S. and the AU. All should clearly agree to link the ceasefire and political tracks, should either of them take off. They could also find ways to support the others' respective efforts, given that neither track has clear momentum. While the September 2025 Quad roadmap (which foresaw an immediate truce) called for a political process to start after the

⁴⁸ After the Burhan-Hemedti meeting fell through, Hemedti embarked on a tour of African capitals, where several governments rolled out the red carpet, including in Nairobi and Kampala. The RSF was also invited alongside Burhan's government to an IGAD summit. Burhan's government withdrew from IGAD in protest, in effect killing the IGAD mediation efforts.

⁴⁹ These parties would also be well positioned to push for women's participation in a transitional government. The war has largely reversed the hard-won, albeit limited, gains for Sudanese women's representation in public life made in the years prior.

conclusion of ceasefire talks, the AU, the EU and others have been pushing for a wider Sudanese political process to start posthaste, under the Quintet's auspices, though AU-led and EU-supported attempts to start such dialogue in the middle of the war have thus far fallen flat. If those efforts, which deserve support given the breadth and magnitude of the issues that Sudanese need to discuss, do eventually gain traction, then coordination between the Quad and Quintet will be crucial. New UN envoy Pekka Haavisto, a former Finnish foreign minister, could emerge as a point person for rallying diplomacy, especially should U.S. efforts tail off.

There is also an urgent need to defuse Sudan-linked tensions in the Horn of Africa more generally. All those with influence, including in Africa, the Middle East, Europe and North America, should press the region's leaders to lower the political temperature and prevent the Sudan war from spilling over regional borders. In particular, those countries with sway in Ethiopia should urge Addis Ababa to retain its official neutral stance in Sudan's civil war and avoid getting more involved. Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and others should also encourage the Sudanese army to try improving relations with Ethiopia, which is put off by the army's close alliance with Egypt and Eritrea, both of which Addis Ababa views as adversaries.

VI. Conclusion

Sudan's spiralling conflict is the worst of all nightmares for Sudanese and is now contributing to instability far outside Sudan's borders. Khartoum is the only world capital to be razed in recent years, and it remains virtually uninhabitable. The rest of the country faces the worst humanitarian conditions on the planet. Alarming, the squabbles among outside powers involved in the conflict only seem to get more bitter. Tensions over the Sudan war are so high that they helped spark a Saudi-Emirati row in Yemen. Neighbours, including the Horn of Africa's largest country, Ethiopia, risk being pulled in. For all the damage the U.S. is doing to its own interests with the new Middle East war, it still leads efforts to broker peace in Sudan. But to succeed it will need to put sustained pressure, including via top-level engagement, on the Quad members who wield the most influence over the belligerents. A humanitarian truce is sorely needed but unlikely to happen without more work within the Quad on a post-conflict landing zone.

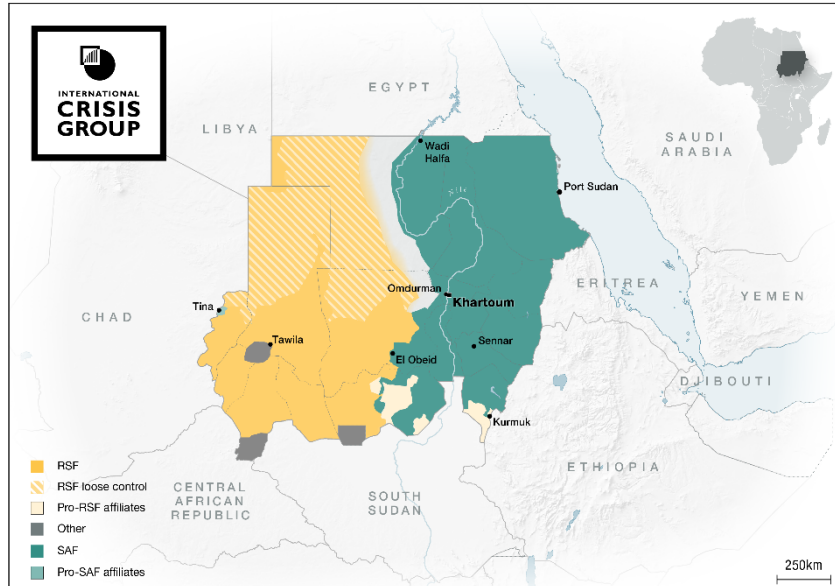
That said, relying on the United States to bring this conflict to an end has been a recipe for disappointment over the past three long years. Other states from Europe to the Middle East to the Horn of Africa will also need to work whatever angles they can – seeking to forge a rapprochement among the Quad's Arab states, encouraging discussion of Sudan's political future and (in the case of regional powers) striving to manage the risk of spillover.

Three years into Sudan's horrendous conflict, there is no clear path out of it. But if those positioned to do so use the tools at their disposal, they may yet be able to blaze such a trail and, in the meantime, limit the risk that this war spreads its misery any further in the region.

Nairobi/Riyadh/Abu Dhabi/Brussels, 13 April 2026

Appendix A: Sudan's De Facto Partition of Territorial Control

Sudan's war has split the country roughly in two, with the Rapid Support Forces in the west (yellow) and the Sudanese army in the east (green).



Sources: Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute as of 26 March 2026 and Crisis Group as of 10 April 2026; Natural Earth. CRISIS GROUP



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