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SUDAN

Prepared and written by: Héloïse Liebenberg - Intern at EISMENA

Edited by: Lyna Ouandjeli - Head of Collaborative Projects and Researcher at EISMENA

With a **population of nearly 52 million**, the Republic of Sudan is among the most ethnically and linguistically diverse countries in the world. Its population speaks **more than four hundred languages and dialects** and consists of **approximately six hundred ethnic groups with multiple religious affiliations**. This diversity reflects a multiplicity of influences: from ancient Nubia and Christian kingdoms, through the gradual Islamization of the territory, the Ottoman period, Mahdist Sudan and the Anglo-Egyptian colonial domination (1899–1956). Bordering Egypt, the northern part of the country is today predominantly Muslim, while the south, more strongly shaped by British influence, has historically been home to a dominant Christian elite, alongside Muslim minorities and populations practising spiritual beliefs outside the major monotheistic traditions.

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Although Sudan was, in 1956, one of the first African countries to achieve independence, the colonial fractures persist to this day, intertwining with postcolonial dynamics and deep economic disparities.

In the twentieth century, this resulted in recurrent armed conflicts, within which ethnicity was often instrumentalized in order to maintain specific modes of governance. While the current war, which erupted in April 2023, is rooted in a power struggle between two Sudanese military rivals and their respective armed forces, its persistence is largely linked to international support. **Attracted by Sudan's gold resources, foreign actors get involved in the conflict, notably through the supply of weapons** in exchange for gold. In order to defend their interests in the region, they side with one of the belligerents, and in some cases, both.

Historical Background

Sudanese history began in the second millennium BCE, when **Nubia** was incorporated into the Egyptian pharaonic empire, leading to significant cultural and religious **Egyptianization**. After the turn of the Common Era, the region experienced a **Christian phase** (the kingdoms of Nobatia, Makuria and Alwa) under the influence of Aksum (present-day Ethiopia), before undergoing **gradual Islamization from Egypt**. Following the partial Egyptian invasion in 640 and the collapse of the Christian kingdoms, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century the region was divided between the Islamized Funj Sultanate and the Kingdom of Darfur in the south, and Egypt in the north. In 1821, Muhammad Ali, then governor of Egypt, a province of the **Ottoman Empire**, began to progressively annex the regions of what is now Sudan. Through violent repression, he imposed a centralized administration in Khartoum and launched agricultural development as well as gold mining throughout the country. Under the reign of Ismaʿil, Muhammad Ali's grandson and successor, **British influence** gradually strengthened in Sudan. In 1867, Ismaʿil called upon Europeans to administer Egypt, entrusting key leadership positions to Britons such as Charles Gordon and Samuel Baker. Under British and French pressure, he was forced to abdicate in 1879, paving the way for London's progressive control over Egypt and, by extension, Sudan, now supervised by the British Consul-General Lord Cromer. Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abd Allah, known as the Mahdi, launched a revolt, proclaimed jihad and won several victories, before the Mahdists were defeated by the British general Kitchener in 1898, marking the return of a new colonial control. Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abd Allah, known as the Mahdi, launched a revolt, proclaimed jihad and won several victories, before the Mahdists were defeated by the British general Kitchener in 1898, marking the return of a new colonial control. In 1899, an **Anglo-Egyptian condominium** - the joint administration of Sudan by Egypt and the United Kingdom - was established. However, it was in fact a British colony: Egyptians were largely sidelined and held very little power. Between 1924, after the Governor-General was assassinated in Cairo, and 1936, the year of Egyptian independence, the United Kingdom officially governed the country alone. From 1945 onwards, a process of gradual autonomy took shape, accompanied by the **rise of nationalism** and the creation of **Sudanese political parties**, such as the Umma Party and the National Unionist Party. On **January 1, 1956**, the prospect of integrating Sudanese territory into Egypt faded as Sudan gained **independence** from British and Egyptian rule. Decades of civil wars followed (the First Civil War, 1955–1972; the Second Civil War, 1983–2005; the Darfur War, 2003–2020; and a new civil war since 2023), along with successive coups d'état and a **political system oscillating between authoritarian regimes and parliamentary democracies**, all highly unstable.

Civil Wars

The **first North-South civil war** broke out as early as **1955**, even before formal independence, opposing the Arab and Muslim northern elites - heirs to colonial power - to the populations of the South, composed of Christian elites and other spiritual beliefs, who demanded equitable participation in the system of governance. In 1969, Marshal Gaafar Mohammed Nimeiry (1969–1985), supported by the Communist Party and the USSR, seized power through a military coup. Under his rule, the **Addis Ababa Accords** were signed in **1972**, ending seventeen years of civil war that had caused 1.5 million deaths according to United Nations archives. Furthermore, the agreement granted relative autonomy to the three southern provinces (Bahr el-Ghazal, Equatoria and Upper Nile). However, tensions were revived in **1978**, after the **discovery of oil in South Sudan** and the construction of a major canal intended to divert Nile waters for Egypt's benefit. Nimeiry abolished the South's autonomous status, depriving it of control over its resources. A few months later, in May **1983**, John Garang created the **Sudan People's Liberation Movement** (SPLM) and its armed wing, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The movement promoted the idea of a "New Sudan": a secular, more equitable and decentralized state ensuring greater representation for all regions.

In September 1983, Nimeiry imposed Sharia law across the entire territory, thereby consolidating his alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood. The accumulation of these tensions led to the final collapse of the Addis Ababa Accords and precipitated the outbreak of the second civil war. According to various estimates, up to 500,000 people perished in this conflict.

In **1983**, the **second civil war**, pitting southern rebel groups against the central authorities in Khartoum, was triggered by the rebellion of the SPLM, led by John Garang. Nimeiry was overthrown in 1985, marking a return to parliamentary democracy: the Umma Party won the elections, and Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi, a descendant of the Mahdi, initiated negotiations with southern rebels. On June 30, 1989, a military coup known as the Inqāz Revolution overthrew the government of al-Mahdi. The coup was led by Omar al-Bashir, who ascended to power and quickly received the support of the National Islamic Front (NIF), led by Hassan al-Turabi. Henceforth, political Islam assumed a central role in the country, notably through the hosting of international Islamist movements. Over a period of twenty-two years, the war caused two million deaths and more than four million displaced people, before ending on January 9, 2005, with a Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Signed in Nairobi between Khartoum and the SPLM, it provided for an exemption of the South from sharia law, six years of autonomy, and a referendum on self-determination.

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Referendum

The referendum, a central element of the peace agreement, was organized six years later, from **January 9 to 15, 2011**. More than 2,600 polling stations were established across the north and south of the country to accommodate nearly four million registered voters, of which 3.8 million in the South. In Juba, the capital of South Sudan, voter turnout was particularly high. Sudanese authorities praised the peaceful conduct of the vote, overseen by some 22,000 South Sudanese police officers and 1,448 members of security units responsible for crowd control and the handling of specific weapons, trained by the police of the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS). Additionally, the ballot was monitored by several international organizations, including the Arab League, the African Union and the European Union. To validate the referendum, a turnout rate of 60% was required, which was slightly exceeded. Out of four million registered voters, more than **3.25 million cast their ballots**. European Union observers spoke of "overwhelming participation" and praised a referendum that met international standards, describing it as "peaceful and credible," despite a few isolated cases of intimidation. However, Nicki Kindersley notes that the population was encouraged to vote for independence through **mechanisms of social pressure**, sometimes violent but more often subtle. From January 9 onwards, preliminary results indicated near-unanimous support for secession. On February 7, 2011, the referendum commission published the final results, according to which 98.83% of voters had opted in favor of South Sudan's secession, that is, almost the entire electorate - a source of pride for the new state. In line with popular discourse, this support contributed to the construction of a founding myth of loyalty and national unity for the newly established state. Representatives of the North and South were thereafter required to reach agreement, within six months, on several crucial issues. Among the most sensitive were border demarcation and security, the status of the Abyei region – claimed by both sides – and questions of citizenship, which were particularly decisive regarding employment and property rights. On July 9, 2011, South Sudan ultimately proclaimed its independence, dividing what had been Africa's largest country in two.

Post-Referendum Period

However, as both Sudanese states are heavily dependent on oil revenues, border and oil-related tensions soon opposed the world's youngest state to its northern neighbour. While **75% of oil reserves are located in South Sudan, pipelines converge northwards**, where port infrastructure provides access to the Red Sea. The northern capital, **Khartoum**, has occupied a central place in Sudanese administration since independence in 1956, hosting the presidential palace, several universities, and numerous mosques, churches and cathedrals. Connected to major railway lines, Nile river traffic and an international airport, Khartoum also concentrates investment and commercial networks, corporate headquarters and transport infrastructure. By contrast, **Juba**, the capital of South Sudan, remains under construction, with limited infrastructure, a poorly diversified economy and a strong presence of international organizations upon which it is structurally dependent. These geo-economic configurations are central to many of the region's conflicts. In 2012, several bilateral agreements were signed between the two Sudanese states, but the sharing of resources remained contentious. The Abyei region, rich in hydrocarbon resources, thus continues to be fiercely disputed.

Parallel to the southern independence movement, war erupted in western Sudan. In **2003**, the **Darfur** region - then poor, anarchic and neglected by al-Bashir's government - entered a cycle of violence initiated by the **Janjaweed** tribal militias. Primarily rooted among Arab tribes in Darfur, the Janjaweed were **created by Omar al-Bashir** and mobilized to repress local demands for a more equitable Sudan. Trained by the State, the militias also recruited fighters from Chad and the Central African Republic. They rapidly committed acts of vandalism, looting, rape, and murder. [1] One of the Janjaweed units was led by Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, known as "Hemeti," a member of the Maaliya clan of the Rizeigat tribe in Darfur. The nickname Hemeti, a diminutive of Mohamed, was adopted by Omar al-Bashir, who called him "Heymayti" - a phonetically similar Arabic term meaning "my protector." After 2003, **Hemeti** leveraged the conflict between Moussa Hilal and al-Bashir [2] to draw closer to the central government, allowing him to gradually establish himself as the **leader of a powerful paramilitary force, a commercial empire, and an influential political machine**. His family company, Al-Gunayd, took control of Darfur's largest artisanal gold mine, located in Jebel Amir, and rapidly became Sudan's leading gold exporter.

Under Hemeti's command, the Janjaweed gradually became more structured, gained influence, and were deployed in other regions of Sudan, such as South Kordofan, Blue Nile and the capital, Khartoum. In 2013, al-Bashir restructured the army and placed a **new paramilitary group, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)**, under his direct authority. Originating from the Janjaweed, these paramilitaries were officially **led by Hemeti**, with seconded officers from the regular army tasked with contributing to their modernization. The RSF continued to fight Darfur rebels and the insurgency in the Nuba Mountains, while also engaging in monitoring the Libyan border, combating irregular migration from Africa, extortion, and, according to some sources, human trafficking. In 2017, the Rapid Support Forces Act, an executive decree issued by al-Bashir, established the RSF as a **regular, autonomous security force officially recognized by the State**. While not yet in direct competition with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the regular army, the RSF functioned as **the president's "Praetorian Guard,"** designed to safeguard him against any coup attempts by the official military. The RSF were placed under the authority of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) rather than the Ministry of Defense, thereby obtaining a hybrid status that revealed the regime's "divide and rule" strategy. Inspired by Ottoman and colonial methods, this strategy consisted of arming competing forces to consolidate power.

The scale of this controlled fragmentation of violence is particularly significant as it normalized the **use of proxy militias as a political tool**, thereby preparing the ground for the current conflict. The RSF's influence further increased when some of its members were deployed abroad as **mercenaries**, notably in the military intervention led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Yemen, in exchange for financial and military support, as well as in the Libyan civil war. In **December 2018,** a **massive popular uprising** erupted in Sudan, soon characterized by the Sudanese people themselves as a revolution. For the first time in the country's history, protests did not originate in the capital but in the periphery. The first city affected was Damazin, in Blue Nile State, before the movement spread to Atbara, a working-class city of high symbolic importance due to its trade union tradition. **Significant economic inequality** persists within Sudan between the center (the capital, Khartoum, and the central states) and the peripheral zones, particularly Darfur and the East, which are far more severely impacted by poverty. This economic distress was further exacerbated by the loss of a large share of oil revenues following the secession of South Sudan in 2011. In Atbara, after the price of bread tripled, students rose up. The movement rapidly gained momentum, first among the city's inhabitants, and subsequently in Khartoum and throughout towns and villages across the Northern region.

The Fall of al-Bachir

The demands of this **"Glorious Revolution"** [3] rapidly transcended the economic dimension and evolved into calls for the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir's regime. Re-elected four times (1996, 2000, 2010, and 2015) in elections boycotted by the opposition, **al-Bashir had remained in power for thirty years**, during which the Sudanese population endured unprecedented violence. In 1996, the UN accused him of supporting terrorism. He was indicted by the ICC for **war crimes and crimes against humanity** in 2009, and subsequently for **genocide** in 2010.

In the face of the rising protests of 2018–2019, the RSF became a key instrument of al-Bashir's regime for repression. In April 2019, when protesters surrounded the military headquarters demanding democracy, al-Bashir deployed the paramilitaries to Khartoum and ordered them to join the army in opening fire on the demonstrators. However, instead of following his orders, the highest-ranking officers, including Hemeti, decided to turn against the president to depose him. Thus, the **coup d'état of April 11, 2019**, brought an end to the al-Bashir regime, paving the way for a brief period of civilian governance.

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Successive Crises in Sudan

The euphoria, however, was short-lived: poverty and indebtedness persisted, and power was seized by a military junta, the **Transitional Military Council** (**TMC**). Led by **Abdel Fattah al-Burhan,** head of the regular army, and his deputy Hemeti, the council failed to address civilian demands. Consequently, protests in favor of a transition to full civilian rule continued. In August 2019, these demands ultimately led to the signing of an agreement between civilian leaders, represented by the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), and the military. Power was shared between the two parties, while Abdalla Hamdok (August 2019–October 2021), nominated by the FFC, became Prime Minister. Yet the transitional government harbored the seeds of its own weakening, as **the military gained the upper hand** and maintained direct control over key ministries, thereby creating a profound imbalance between military and civilian authority. [4] The protest movement persisted with clear demands [5] that Hamdok struggled to satisfy, thus eroding his political support and the legitimacy of his government. Exploiting these divisions, al-Burhan and Hemeti allied to bring an end to civilian rule: on **October 25, 2021**, a **coup d'état orchestrated jointly by the two generals** overthrew Hamdok. The FFC denounced the coup and maintained their demand for a civilian transition.

Under the pressure of **ongoing protests** [6], new negotiations with the civilian faction were initiated, culminating in the signing of a **Framework Agreement on December 5, 2022**. However, the agreement was criticized by several sectors of civil society, who viewed it as lacking both legitimacy and efficacy. By aligning themselves with it, the FFC were discredited and experienced a significant loss of popular influence. Now void, the Framework Agreement primarily revealed a **profound antagonism between al-Burhan and Dagalo**. Since their alliance was purely circumstantial, numerous fundamentally divergent interests pitted the two generals against each other. On one side, al-Burhan defended the traditional military apparatus, intending to preserve state control to protect his own resources. On the other, Hemeti consolidated his power by relying on the RSF's economic activities, which were rooted in a war economy. Seeking to maintain the military, financial, and political autonomy developed over the years, Hemeti thus challenged the authority of the regular army. Furthermore, both parties rejected the central demand of the continuous popular protests: **the dismantling of their economic empires and the cessation of their interference in politics**. The RSF control significant gold deposits, while the army dominates vast public conglomerates.

The 2023 "Civil War"

The decisive obstacle, however, lay in the disagreement over the **integration of the RSF into the regular army**. Threatened by the power of Hemeti's forces, al-Burhan demanded the absorption of the paramilitaries within two years, accompanied by the dissolution of their autonomous command. Seeking to preserve his **influence**, Hemeti firmly opposed this, advocating a ten-year timeframe and the preservation of parallel structures. Compounding these issues was a broader geopolitical dimension linked to the international backers of each camp: if the RSF were to be integrated into the army, their **external partnerships** would be jeopardized. Between ambitions to control the country's resources and disagreements over security sector reform, the power rivalry ultimately erupted into open armed conflict. On April 15, 2023, fighting broke out simultaneously in the capital, Khartoum State and Darfur, revealing meticulous preparations by both camps. In Khartoum, where the two parties engaged in street-by-street combats, the RSF targeted the presidential palace, airports and television centers, aiming at the rapid neutralization of power. In response, the army carried out airstrikes, the only domain in which it retains an advantage over the RSF.

Notes

[1] An investigation conducted by the United States attributed responsibility for the genocide in Darfur to the Janjaweed militias. The case was referred to the ICC, which indicted four individuals, including al-Bashir, who denies any involvement in these crimes. At the time, Hemeti was among many Janjaweed commanders deemed too subordinate to be prosecuted. Only one senior Janjaweed leader, Ali Kushayb (Ali Abd-al-Rahman), was prosecuted. On December 9, 2025, he was sentenced to twenty years in prison for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

[2] Musa Hilal was a leader of the Janjaweed militias. Hemeti was then a member of the Janjaweed and served under Hilal's command. When al-Bashir decided to sideline Hilal due to a disagreement, he selected Hemeti to lead the new group. Hemeti's ascent to this position is linked to his seizure of the Jebel Amer gold mine in North Darfur and the subsequent arrest of Musa Hilal, who had controlled the mine prior to Hemeti.

[3] The protests of the "Glorious Revolution" (as named by the Sudanese people) of 2018–2019 were distinguished by their unprecedented scale and duration. They were driven by a renewed mobilization process that was more strategic than previous movements, which had been primarily centered on the middle class and were more vulnerable to state repression.

[4] In July 2019, an agreement was reached, and signed in August in the form of a Constitutional Charter establishing a power-sharing arrangement. This was later amended by the Juba Peace Agreement of October 2020, signed between the transitional government and several rebel groups from Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile. These groups agreed to disarm in exchange for greater inclusion of their long-marginalized populations in national governance and resource sharing. However, the transitional government failed to establish a clear separation of powers: the Constitutional Charter permitted the military to reject proposals from civilian leaders, granted them immunity for past crimes (including the June 3, 2019 massacre), and provided them with veto power over certain civilian appointments, such as the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court or the Attorney General.

[5] The neighborhood Resistance Committees and the Sudanese protest movement pursue five major priorities: a full civilian transition (refusing any further partnership with the military under the slogan "no negotiations, no partnership, no legitimacy"); a revision of the Juba Agreement (to ensure better integration of populations directly affected by the war); constitutional reform (addressing structural and ethnic inequalities to facilitate free and fair elections); justice and accountability, including prosecutions of state actors involved in violence against civilians; and the establishment of a Legislative Council.

[6] In response to the persistent protests, Hemeti deployed his forces, including the RSF militias, which committed massive acts of violence: hundreds of individuals were killed, women were subjected to sexual violence, and protesters were thrown into the Nile with bricks tied to their ankles. (Human Rights Watch)

Notes

Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo "Hemeti"

Born in 1974 or 1975 into a modest background, Hemeti left school in early adolescence and earned his living by trading camels across the desert to Libya and Egypt.
He is the leader of the RSF.

Omar Hassan Ahmed al-Bachir

Former president of Sudan (1989-2019), al-Bachir accessed to power through a coup supported by Islamist forces and ruled for thirty years. He is accused of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide by the International Criminal Court.

Abdel Fattah al-Burhan

Born in 1960, he became the de facto Head of State of Sudan in 2019 and was subsequently appointed President of the Transitional Sovereignty Council in 2021. In opposition to the RSF led by Hemeti, **he heads the Sudanese Armed Forces**.

Economy

Covering an area of 1.9 million square kilometers, Sudan is the **third-largest country in Africa**, located at the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile, where **millions of hectares of fertile land** extend. It is bordered by seven African countries and possesses an **outlet to the Red Sea**, through which approximately 10% of global maritime trade transits. Endowed with significant natural resources, notably **gold and oil**, Sudan represents a major stake for regional and global powers. Domestically, these resources fuel conflict among rival groups that appropriate gold, oil, and agricultural land to develop their own commercial networks. These dynamics intensified under al-Bashir, whose rule was marked by increasing **militarization** and a **war economy** that severely undermined the state of the country. Sudan was ranked among the poorest countries in the world [1] well before the outbreak of the war in April 2023. Under al-Bashir, an **economic crisis** began in 2011, precipitated by the secession of South Sudan, which deprived Sudan of 75% of its oil revenues. The crisis deepened in 2018, with soaring inflation, the depletion of foreign currency reserves, and tax revenues among the lowest in the world. This situation was further compounded by **years of sanctions and politico-economic isolation** imposed by the international community from 1996 onwards, initially for alleged support for terrorism and later in response to crimes committed by the regime.

Between 2019 and 2021, the civilian government attempted to stabilize the economy, unsuccessfully. Since the 2021 coup, rising inflation has continued to erode the living standards of most of the population. In 2023, the war considerably worsened the situation: through the destruction of infrastructure, the siphoning of resources by the belligerents, and population displacement both within and beyond Sudan's borders, **the economy has collapsed entirely**. [2] The conflict led to the closure of dozens of economic flagships, destroying thousands of jobs; both the private sector and public administrations ceased paying their employees. The country has been plunged into a state of **extreme poverty and insecurity**, affecting 64% of the population by 2025, while unemployment has doubled in two years. This insecurity has forced numerous foreign companies to suspend their operations and investments. [3] In Khartoum, financial transactions we frozen following the looting of banks, while the banking sector attempts to maintain operations in Port Sudan. However, the economy remains deeply devastated, and fund transfers have become extremely difficult. The population is forced to rely on banking applications, the use of which depends on an increasingly unstable internet connection.

Furthermore, major industries have been targeted by looting and aerial bombardments, while equipment and infrastructure (transportation, buildings, pipelines) have been destroyed by the fighting, hindering the production and delivery of goods across the country. Consequently, the belligerents have retreated to **alternative trade routes**: on the Red Sea, **the army has made Port Sudan its center of operations**, from which it controls the majority of aid flows and where the Central Bank of Sudan has relocated. **The RSF rely on routes crossing Chad and Libya**. Ongoing instability has further reduced diaspora remittances and international aid, **rendering external debt unsustainable**. Economic decline had already been set in motion by decades of military rule, during which the Sudanese economy became increasingly concentrated in Khartoum, while peripheral regions were neglected. From the onset of the war, the capital was at the heart of the fighting and fell largely under RSF control, before the army regained control on March 25, 2025. Following the **suspension of air traffic and the blockage of major transit routes**, exports have come to a standstill. Nearly 80% of national trade passes through the infrastructure of Port Sudan, until then spared by the fighting but now paralyzed.

The war has further intensified the **militarization of Sudan's economy**, given that nearly 80% of resources were already controlled by the military and its affiliates in 2020. Sudan's abundant natural resources (gold, gum arabic, sesame, livestock and oil), which form the backbone of its economy, are now at the mercy of a lingering war, and all economic sectors have become militarized. As full participants in the country's economy, t**he belligerents have even become the nation's primary employers**. Nevertheless, it should be noted that for a large part of the Sudanese population, **the army represents the State** and therefore cannot be placed on an equal footing with paramilitary forces. To pay the salaries of their hundreds of thousands of fighters, the army and the RSF hold **significant financial assets across multiple sectors**, including gold and oil extraction, agriculture, construction, and telecommunications. Revenues, which are extremely meager, are **appropriated by both camps**, while budgetary capacities are virtually non-existent following the erosion of public revenue and expenditure after the collapse of state institutions. **The meagre official revenues primarily benefit the two factions**, each of which seeks to establish its own territory, administration, and budget. While the army has established itself in the north and east to exploit the ports and collect transit fees on South Sudanese oil, the RSF fund themselves through the gold trade and exert greater control over the west and south of the country.

The brief economic activity that persists relies mainly on gold extraction, agriculture, and livestock. Nevertheless, many fertile regions have been destroyed by the fighting, most notably the Gezira region. Following the secession of South Sudan in 2011, **Sudan lost nearly two-thirds of its oil deposits**, now exploited by the newly formed state. Deprived of its main oil revenues, the Sudanese trade balance turned into a deficit starting in 2012. To compensate for this economic loss, **Omar al-Bashir decided to shift the national strategy** toward mining, particularly gold, the country's primary mineral resource. [4] Between 2013 and 2023, Sudan became the **third-largest gold producer on the African continent** (behind Ghana and South Africa), recording exceptional growth in gold production estimated at approximately 160% between 2012 and 2017. While other African countries host large foreign mining companies on their territory to manage gold extraction, Sudan relies on its **own artisanal mining sector**. In 2018, with $1.2 billion in revenue, gold represented the country's primary source of income. [5] The population, however, did not benefit from this boom: instead of being managed by the private sector and taxed, the gold mines are held by the military, sparking popular protests well before the outbreak of the war. Today, **both the RSF and the army exploit mines** within their respective zones of control and, relying on gold trading companies established before the war, **finance their arms purchases with export revenues**.

Following the fall of al-Bashir, several restrictions governing gold mining in Sudan were lifted, notably the export ban previously imposed on local producers. Since January 1, 2020, the Central Bank has lost its monopoly on gold purchases, and **companies are now permitted to export up to 70% of their production**, provided that the revenues are repatriated into national banks. The legal framework of the mining sector suffers from significant shortcomings, such as the absence of clear procedures for reviewing mining licence applications and a lack of regulatory deadlines. This fosters corruption and administrative sluggishness, both of which are major obstacles to the sector's development. The Sudanese gold trade also benefits **international buyers** whose involvement in the conflict - notably through the **supply of weaponry** - directly contributes to its prolongation. Hemeti, the head of the RSF, maintains ties with the Russian mercenary group Wagner, which launched its own mining operations in Sudan under al-Bashir. Every year, Wagner causes Sudan to lose millions of dollars in public revenue by smuggling tons of gold out of the country. These extractions have become increasingly profitable for Wagner: since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Sudanese gold revenues have allowed for the bypassing of financial sanctions imposed on Russia, creating a funding pipeline for the war. The primary destination for illegal African gold is the **United Arab Emirates** (43.1% of exports and 19.8% of imports), one of the key hubs of international trade and one of the few markets accessible without restrictions. Other major trading partners for Sudan include **China** (15.9% of exports and 22.2% of imports) and **India** (18.4% of imports). Both camps continue to fight for control of the gold sector, which represents half of the declared export revenues, and potentially nearly double that when illicit gold exports are included.

Notes

[1] In 2022, approximately 46 million inhabitants lived on an average annual income of $750 (£600) per person.

[2] Key economic indicators for 2024: declining GDP (-20%), average annual inflation of 200%, and a public debt-to-GDP ratio of 344%.

[3] Notably, this includes enterprises crucial to the population's food supply, such as Samil Foods, which produced thousands of tons of peanut paste to combat childhood undernutrition.

[4] According to the World Gold Council, more than 76 tons of gold were extracted in Sudan in 2019.

[5] In 2017, more than one million artisanal and small-scale miners were active in the sector, thereby keeping the economy afloat.

International Involvement

In 1956, Sudan's independence put an end to the risk of its annexation by Egypt and marked the beginning of a Sudanese diplomacy detached from British influence. On January 12, 1956, just days after the official declaration of independence, the country became a **member of the United Nations**. The First Civil War (1955–1972) saw limited international support: the Khartoum government was backed by the Soviet Union, while Southern factions opposed to the government were supported by the United States and certain neighboring countries, most notably Ethiopia. Under the regime of Nimeiry (1969–1985), who rose to power with the support of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union, the **external exploitation of Sudan's internal cleavages** intensified. During the 1970s, Nimeiry distanced himself from his initial allies - the Soviet Union and progressive Arab states - to align more closely with the Western bloc, particularly the United States.

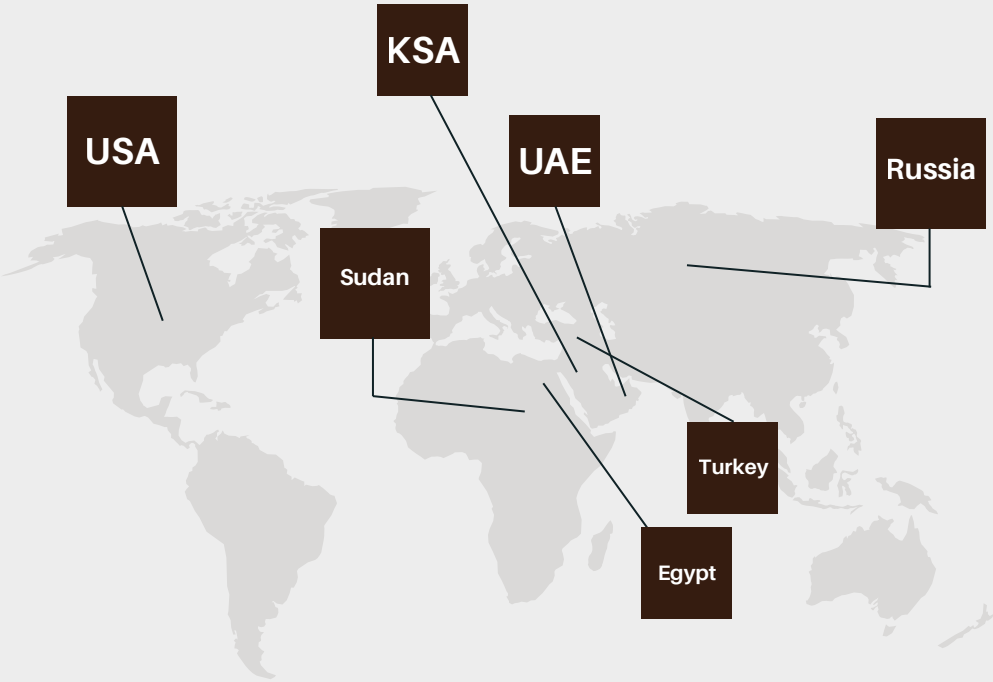
Within the context of the Cold War, this strategic realignment foreshadowed the subsequent **dynamics of geopolitical manipulation** to which Sudan would be subjected. In 1976, a mutual defense treaty was signed with Egypt. The regime of Omar al-Bashir (1989–2019) marked several turning points in Sudanese diplomacy. The **second civil war** (1983–2005) became highly internationalized, gradually evolving into a **proxy conflict of the late Cold War**. While the Khartoum government was backed by Iran, Libya, and China, John Garang's SPLM received support from Ethiopia, Uganda, and - indirectly - the United States and Israel.

Gaafar Mohamed an-Nimeiry was a Sudanese military officer and statesman. He ruled the country from 1969 to 1985 following a military coup. In 1973, he established a single-party state.

During the 1990s, tensions emerged between al-Bashir's regime and the United States, which accused Sudan of maintaining Islamist ties with international terrorist organizations. From 1991 to 1996, the country hosted Osama bin Laden, prompting Washington to place Sudan on the list of **State Sponsors of Terrorism** and to impose a **sanctions regime** in 1993. [1] In 1997, gum arabic was exempted from these sanctions due to its essential nature for the consumer goods industry. [2] During the Darfur War (2003–2020), tensions intensified, and the repression and human rights violations carried out under al-Bashir earned him international condemnation. [3] Today, the war is exacerbated by the involvement of international actors with divergent interests, despite a **United Nations arms embargo on Darfur**. [4] Furthermore, the conflict worsens instability within and beyond the region, particularly in the Horn of Africa, where the fallout from the conflict manifests as **insecurity**, the **disruption of trade routes**, and **migratory flows**. Foreign partners (examined in the following section) intervene in the conflict either directly or indirectly by providing weapons, mercenaries, or logistical support to one - or even both - camps.

The official army receives direct support from multiple countries accused of providing military aid to al-Burhan's troops.

As Chairman of the Sudanese Transitional Sovereignty Council (the executive body established after the 2021 coup), al-Burhan benefits from diplomatic support and a degree of international recognition. Among his closest allies is **Egypt**, whose interest in Sudan's stability rests on two primary factors. First, Egypt seeks to secure its southern border, which is directly exposed to the conflicts of its neighbor. Second, both states are traversed by the Nile, a vital resource for the Egyptian people. The collapse of Sudan risks undermining Egyptian water security, which has already been threatened since the inauguration of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in September 2025. Furthermore, more than four million Sudanese reside in Egypt (excluding refugees who have arrived since the start of the war in 2023), creating social proximity between the two countries. Ties are maintained on a **military level** through the provision of equipment to the Sudanese army, but also on a **diplomatic level**, notably through joint opposition to the Nile River Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) [5], which entered into force on October 13, 2024. Although Egypt was the first country visited by al-Burhan after the outbreak of the conflict in 2023, and contacts have multiplied since then, Cairo denies any direct involvement in the conflict. However, the RSF accuse the Egyptians of delivering weapons and fighter jets, as well as conducting drone strikes in Darfur.



According to Middle East Eye, Egypt and Turkey strengthened their support for the army following the RSF's seizure of El Fasher. Although **Turkey** officially maintains a neutral stance, several media outlets have revealed the **supply of lethal weapons** [6] **and drones to the Sudanese army**. These assets are reported to have significantly contributed to the recapture of Khartoum, as well as the army's advances in Al Gezira State and North Kordofan, particularly around its capital, El Obeid. Parts of the Turkish press have even called upon the authorities to bolster military support for Khartoum. While **Saudi Arabia** has long maintained a position of neutrality, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, during his visit to Washington in November 2025, urged the Trump administration to i**ncrease pressure on the UAE**.

Positioning itself alongside the United States as a mediating actor, Saudi Arabia has since increased its material support to the army. **Russia** and **Iran** both share an interest in Sudan's **mineral resources** as well as its **strategic position along the Red Sea**. They are accused of delivering drones and fighter jets to government forces and of exploring with Khartoum the **possibility of establishing military bases on Sudanese territory**. While Iran officially refutes these allegations, Russia has been pursuing this project since 2017 and, in February 2025, signed an agreement with the military government to establish a naval base on the Sudanese Red Sea coast. Russia also provides support to the RSF (see below), while progressively shifting its weight in favor of the regular army as the conflict unfolds.

Diplomatic relations between Tehran and Khartoum were restored in October 2023 following a seven-year rupture. [7] In October 2024, **the RSF accused Iran of providing direct military assistance to the Sudanese army**. In January 2025, the "Eastern Battalion", a Sudanese militia allied with the army, claimed to have received weapons and military training provided by Eritrea. More recently, in October 2025, **Pakistan** concluded a $1.5 billion defense agreement with the army, aimed at bolstering their aerial, terrestrial, and defensive capabilities against the RSF. This includes the supply of trainer aircraft, drones, and armored vehicles, as well as maintenance and the joint production of military equipment. Furthermore, several Sudanese media outlets report that the army is seeking to acquire Russian fighter jets from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

On the other side, the RSF are also supplied by **multiple states, all of which deny involvement.** Following the cross-border recruitment of fighters in the early 2000s, their first lasting international ties were forged with the **Gulf states starting in the 2010s**. Officially established by al-Bashir in 2013, the RSF were granted a semi-official status, distinct from the regular armed forces. Tasked with "combating rebellions" and protecting borders, they were placed under the command of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). Rapidly, RSF contingents were deployed as **mercenaries** in Yemen (2015–2019) and Libya. The relationship between the RSF and the **UAE** has persisted ever since, constituting the most well-documented element of this proxy war.

Since the onset of the conflict, the UAE has supplied the paramilitaries with **weapons**, as well as medical equipment and other forms of support. In exchange, **the Emiratis receive significant quantities of gold** extracted from the Darfur mines controlled by Hemeti. The gold trade between Dubai and Sudan increased by 300% in a single year, reaching nearly $1.7 billion in 2023. This trade primarily transits through the airport in El Geneina, the capital of West Darfur. Emirati actions in Sudan are part of a **broader strategy led by Abu Dhabi**, which aims to consolidate energy supply sources and trade routes toward Asia across the African continent. Within this strategy, Sudan has become a major strategic pivot, particularly regarding the **control of its Red Sea ports**. In 2025, the military authority accused the RSF of conducting drone strikes - sourced from the UAE - on Port Sudan, its provisional headquarters, an allegation the paramilitaries deny. On May 6, 2025, the military authority severed diplomatic relations and recalled its personnel from the Sudanese embassy in Abu Dhabi, labeling the UAE an "aggressor state." Simultaneously, Amnesty International revealed that the RSF had reportedly carried out attacks using howitzers and guided bombs manufactured by the Chinese group Norinco. These weapons were likely exported to the UAE before being transferred to the RSF.

Russia also maintains ties with both rival parties, its primary objective remaining the construction of a naval base in Port Sudan. While the **involvement of the Wagner Group (Africa Corps) in Sudanese gold extraction** is confirmed, its full scale remains difficult to estimate. These revenues are notably **used to finance military operations in Ukraine** - allegations that Moscow denies. [8] More broadly, the RSF are accused of recruiting mercenaries from several African countries, Colombia, and Ukraine. Regionally, the paramilitaries are gaining influence by collaborating with n**eighboring countries that serve as conduits for equipment**. According to UN reports, Chad, Libya, the Central African Republic, and Somalia constitute transport corridors for combat vehicles, drones, and other weaponry. In addition to supplying the RSF with arms and mercenaries, South Sudan also provides them with medical assistance. [9] **Kenya** supports the paramilitaries primarily on a diplomatic level: after hosting RSF leaders on several occasions, the country organized a political meeting in February 2025 that led to the **creation of an RSF parallel governing structure known as "Tasis."** Consequently, the military authority in Khartoum recalled its ambassador from Nairobi in February 2025.

Notes

[1] Sudan is subject to a comprehensive set of international restrictions, including limitations on foreign aid, a prohibition on the export and sale of military equipment, a requirement to notify the U.S. Congress regarding certain dual-use goods, and specific voting protocols governing assistance from international financial institutions. These are supplemented by restrictions on debt relief and various other regulatory constraints.

[2] Gum arabic is a natural additive derived from acacia sap. Used as an emulsifier in the production of soft drinks and confectionery, there is no viable alternative to its use. Approximately 70% of global production originates from Sudan, which accounts for its exemption from sanctions in 1997. Further reading: "Soudan : La gomme arabique s'efface" | Le Canard enchaîné; "L'industrie alimentaire mondiale finance la guerre au Soudan" | Mediapart.

[3] International Criminal Court: Two arrest warrants (March 4, 2009; July 12, 2010); Charges: five counts of crimes against humanity (murder, extermination, forcible transfer of population, torture, and rape); two counts of war crimes (intentionally directing attacks against a civilian population or against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities, and pillaging); three counts of genocide (killing, causing serious bodily or mental harm, and deliberately inflicting on each target group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction, allegedly committed between at least 2003 and 2008 in Darfur).

[4] The embargo has been in place since 2005 and has been extended until September 2026.

[5] On October 13 in Entebbe, Uganda, the agreement on the equitable use of water resources in the Nile Basin was formally confirmed by the African Union. Under the terms of the agreement, the Nile Basin states "shall in their respective territories utilize the water resources of the Nile River system in an equitable and reasonable manner." Among the ten countries present, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania ratified the agreement; Egypt and Sudan opposed it, while the Democratic Republic of the Congo abstained.

[6] The Washington Post and the Turkish press have reported that the weapons allegedly originate from Baykar, Turkey's largest defense company.

[7] Long considered one of Iran's few Sunni Arab partners, Sudan severed diplomatic relations with Tehran in January 2016 following an attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Several analysts interpret this decision as a pragmatic repositioning dictated by economic imperatives: facing a profound crisis, Khartoum sought a rapprochement with Saudi Arabia to secure financial support and investment. In March 2016, Sudan reaffirmed its alignment with Riyadh by joining the military coalition in Yemen against Houthi rebels. Sudanese authorities have officially denied any economic motivation behind this realignment.

[8] According to CNN, since 2018, as much as $13.4 billion worth of gold has allegedly been diverted from Sudan to Syria via Russian aircraft.

[9] Strong human ties exist between Chad and Sudan, particularly with the Darfur region. Since 2010, the security of their 1,300 km border has been managed by the Joint Chadian-Sudanese Military Force. Even prior to 2023, the number of Sudanese refugees had reached approximately 400,000 following the Darfur crisis, a figure that has only increased since.

Society

Sudan is engulfed in a prolonged humanitarian crisis, fueled by recurring armed conflicts, chronic political instability, and a weakening economy. The influence and autonomy of modern Sudanese civil society have been profoundly eroded by over five decades of successive authoritarian and military regimes. Even before the outbreak of the current war, the civic space was already classified as "repressed," facing a state apparatus that stifled any criticism or form of organization likely to undermine its power. Numerous international human rights organizations regularly report **severe restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and the press**, as well as arbitrary arrests and detentions in inhumane conditions. Security forces have been accused of **acts of torture, sexual violence, and extrajudicial killings**. The regular army, rebel groups, and paramilitary forces have consistently committed **massive human rights violations** - most notably in Darfur since 2003, in South Kordofan and Blue Nile from 2011, during the 2018-2019 protests, and since April 2023. Furthermore, the militaro-Islamist regime established in 1989 consolidated its grip on the state apparatus through purges within the military and security services. These violations have had a profoundly damaging impact on the country's civic space.

Despite a temporary improvements following the 2019 revolution, **the legal environment deteriorated again** from 2021 onwards, particularly following the October military coup. Since April 2023, civil society organizations have been primarily obstructed by the RSF and military intelligence services. The progress made after the fall of Omar al-Bashir - such as the 2019 establishment of a UN Human Rights Office in Sudan with a full mandate and regional offices in Darfur, Blue Nile, South Kordofan and eastern Sudan - was largely undone by the outbreak of war.

The human rights situation, now described as "disastrous and alarming," has deteriorated primarily due to the actions of both the RSF and the SAF. Sudan currently holds several grim records: it is experiencing the w**orld's most severe humanitarian crisis** and the **largest child displacement crisis** [1], with nearly 14 million people forcibly displaced since the start of the conflict. More than half of the population suffers from malnutrition, and access to clean water is extremely limited. The combined effects of the rainy season and overcrowding have revived epidemics of cholera and dengue fever. Across all eighteen Sudanese states, millions of people face acute food insecurity driven by economic and political crises, climate shocks, and mass population displacement. **Sudan is currently the only country in the world where famine has been officially confirmed**. [2] Of the 30 million people requiring humanitarian assistance, more than half are children - 90% of whom are deprived of schooling, and nearly a third are under the age of five.

Violations committed against children, including mutilation, murder, abduction, and attacks on schools, have multiplied. The war has also precipitated the total **collapse of the healthcare system**. Hospitals are frequently targeted by looting, assaults, and shelling by armed groups. Dozens of doctors and healthcare workers have been murdered or abducted by RSF members to forcibly treat their combatants. Access to care has become difficult or even impossible; nearly 80% of hospital facilities are out of service, as are the country's primary pharmaceutical factories. Due to supply shortages, the price of medication has skyrocketed, becoming unaffordable for the millions of Sudanese who have lost their livelihoods. Humanitarian aid, hindered by corruption and bureaucracy, remains largely insufficient. In May 2023, nearly 3,000 active **humanitarian organizations ceased operations in Sudan**. United Nations warehouses have been looted or burned, and hundreds of civil society organizations have seen their operational capacities and infrastructure severely compromised.

Women

Sudanese women's rights and freedoms are profoundly restricted. During the 2018-2019 uprising, women were on the front lines of the **struggle for political and legal equality**. After the fall of the regime, Abdalla Hamdok, Prime Minister of the transitional government, made promises of reform and went so far as to appoint four female ministers. However, these promises remained largely symbolic. Between the 2021 military coup and the outbreak of war in April 2023, feminist demands and calls for a civilian government were silenced. Today, t**he Sudanese legal framework remains heavily discriminatory**. The penal code, partially based on Sharia law, makes access to justice particularly difficult for women.

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Although the Public Order Law was officially repealed in 2020, it continues to be informally enforced, serving as a tool for social control and repression, particularly against female activists.

Family law grants men **extensive authority over women's bodies and lives**, with limits that are not clearly defined. Women must obtain legal authorization from a male guardian to obtain and maintain custody of their children or to pursue legal recourse for the violence they have suffered. Socially marginalized from the political sphere and the labor market, they find themselves in a state of **extreme vulnerability**.

Their safety is further endangered as the conflict has shattered any form of order in the country. With cities controlled by armed groups and the movement of people heavily restricted by roadblocks and checkpoints, the security of the remaining inhabitants - most often women - is gravely threatened. The conflict has triggered an **unprecedented surge in sexual violence**. Tens of thousands of women and girls are victims of harassment, abduction, and rape, perpetrated by paramilitary forces and, to a lesser extent, by soldiers of the regular army. These crimes occur within conflict zones themselves, as well as during displacement and within host countries. Several sources have also revealed the existence of **sex trafficking networks** linked to the RSF, primarily in Darfur, where hundreds of women are held captive and sold as sex slaves. These acts are part of a continuum of systematic violence against women, particularly in Darfur, where the Janjaweed committed mass sexual violence against non-Arab minorities during the 2003 war. **In 2014, the regular army carried out a mass rape of 221 women in Tabit** (North Darfur) over a period of thirty-six consecutive hours. [3] In wartime, rape is transformed into a weapon.

Women, viewed as **symbols of pride, masculinity, and honor**, are used to strike the adversary in his social and symbolic core. Aimed at **humiliation** between men, this tactic entirely erases the woman, reducing her to a mere instrument, part of the **"spoils of war."** In addition to the physical and psychological trauma of the act itself, Sudanese women are condemned to stay silent about their suffering due to the **strong social stigma surrounding sexual violence**. As rape is considered a shameful act capable of dishonoring an entire family or clan, women are **forced into silence by fear of reprisals and a lack of support**. To avoid infamy, some heads of households decide to forcibly marry off their daughters, sometimes to RSF combatants. A high suicide rate is also observed among women victims. At the same time, the issue of violence against women is **highly politicized** within armed groups, under the slogan, **"Our dignity lies in defending the virtue of our women."** Far from being a recognition of the suffering endured by Sudanese women, this slogan instrumentalizes their bodies, establishing them as national symbols of integrity and masculinity. By denouncing the crimes of the opposing camp's soldiers, both sides co-opt the debate to gain popular support and legitimize violence against civilians.

Legally, this results in the vast majority of women declining to report rapes, particularly when committed by members of the regular army. While **violence perpetrated by the RSF serves the national anti-war narrative**, these crimes are also rarely formally denounced. Between the social taboo surrounding rape, the inaccessibility of police and judicial services in conflict zones, and the increased risk associated with reporting, women have no room for maneuver to protect themselves or obtain justice. Thus, **the near-totality of sexual violence in Sudan remains unpunished**. Furthermore, the loss of male family members leaves women even more exposed to violence and the risk of sexual assault. The destruction of markets by the war, combined with the near-exclusive burden of family responsibility, prevents most women from pursuing a profession or education, forcing them to find alternative means of survival.

This heightens the risk of exploitation, deprives them of autonomy, and reinforces the cycle of precariousness. For many women, their livelihood depends on their daily presence in the streets, where they sell drinks, handicrafts, and beauty products. With the outbreak of conflict in Khartoum, these workspaces were transformed into actual battlefields. Lacking savings or the means to flee the capital, many find themselves trapped on the outskirts, **exposed to violence and exploitation by armed groups**. Testimonies indicate that the RSF have reportedly abducted female street vendors to force them to cook, wash laundry, and perform various domestic tasks in their service. Moreover, women must often travel kilometers on foot to access vital necessities such as food, clean water, or medical care. During these hours of travel, they are particularly vulnerable and frequently fall victim to assault or harassment by armed men.

The Sudanese war is a profoundly **patriarchal and gendered conflict**, waged by men and for men. This struggle for power occurs at the expense of civilians: women, children, and vulnerable men. Lacking protection, voice, or weaponry, women are held hostage and forced to pay the ultimate price. At the same time, the state's failure to provide support, its inability to protect, and its overall indifference have **pushed women to develop their own mechanisms of self-protection**. Showing remarkable resilience, they organize into neighborhood networks, feminist movements, and community-based organizations, playing an essential role in humanitarian assistance. **In the shadow of the conflict, women constitute a central pillar of Sudanese society**, carrying on a long tradition of female resistance. [4]

Notes

1] OCHA 2023e.

[2] UN, December 2025.

[3] Report by the NGO Human Rights Watch. The crime occurred on October 30, 2014.

[4] In 2019, women constituted a key factor in the fall and overthrow of the al-Bashir regime. Since the outbreak of the current war, Women's Emergency Response Rooms (WRRs) have been established. These are emergency structures for women that go beyond the simple distribution of food and medicine; they create shelters, promote economic empowerment initiatives, and implement accountability systems to combat the endemic conflict-related violence. The protocols deployed to address sexual violence reflect the extensive experience of activists facing the security-centered governance system of President Omar al-Bashir (in power from 1989 until the 2019 revolution). Their current humanitarian interventions mobilize local feminist knowledge as tools for social transformation.

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