

# Beyond Humanitarian Catastrophe: The Sudan War, the Crisis of Sovereignty, and the State's Struggle for Survival

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**ABSTRACT** *This commentary argues that the war in Sudan should be understood not only as a humanitarian catastrophe but also as an existential struggle over sovereignty, state survival, and institutional continuity. Since April 2023, international attention has largely focused on displacement, hunger, civilian suffering, and the collapse of basic services. While these dimensions are indispensable, a purely humanitarian framework obscures the deeper political and strategic nature of the conflict. The war represents a confrontation between the Sudanese state, embodied institutionally by the Sudanese Armed Forces, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a militia structure sustained by external support networks, cross-border logistics, and foreign fighters. By examining the RSF's militia character, the internationalization of the conflict, the atrocities in Darfur, and the wider regional security implications, this article contends that lasting peace in Sudan requires the restoration of state authority, the protection of sovereignty, accountability for crimes, and the dismantling of parallel armed structures.*

**Keywords:** Darfur, Sudan, Sudanese Armed Forces, Rapid Support Forces

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## Introduction

**S**ince April 2023, the world has viewed Sudan largely through the lens of a humanitarian catastrophe. Images of millions of displaced people, hunger, destroyed cities, a collapsed health system, and fragmented families have rightly drawn the attention of the international community. Today, Sudan is experiencing one of the gravest humanitarian crises of the contemporary world. Yet focusing solely on the humanitarian dimension causes a much more fundamental reality to be overlooked: Sudan is today struggling to survive as a sovereign state. This war is not only a struggle for human survival; it is also a struggle to protect the state, sovereignty, institutions, territorial integrity, and the national future.

Defining the war in Sudan only as a “civil war,” a “power struggle between two military actors,” or a “humanitarian crisis” is incomplete and misleading. Sudan today faces a destructive assault against state authority by a militia structure sustained by external support networks, operating through cross-border logistical routes, and reinforced by foreign fighters and mercenaries. The activities of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have long exceeded the boundaries of an internal political rivalry in the conventional sense. The war in Sudan has now become a struggle between state and militia, sovereignty and fragmentation, institutional continuity and proxy-driven chaos.

The Sudan war can no longer be treated as a crisis manageable solely

through humanitarian aid mechanisms. This war is a critical example of the internationalization of contemporary civil wars, the acquisition of political and military capacity by non-state armed actors through external support, and the erosion of sovereign state institutions. Therefore, the international approach toward Sudan should not be limited to the protection of civilians and the delivery of humanitarian aid; it must also place at its center the protection of Sudan’s sovereignty, institutional integrity, and legitimate national security architecture.

## Limits of the Humanitarian Framework

The humanitarian dimension of the war in Sudan cannot be denied. Millions of Sudanese have been displaced, millions face food insecurity, health services have collapsed, and educational and productive infrastructure has suffered severe damage. Yet the discourse of humanitarian crisis often pushes the political and strategic nature of the conflict into the background. When the international community views Sudan only through hunger, migration, and aid corridors, the central cause of the war –the targeting of state authority and the institutionalization of externally supported militia violence– is largely obscured.

This is not only an analytical shortcoming. It is also a serious problem with political consequences. Viewing a war solely as a humanitarian crisis

can blur the qualitative differences between the parties. In the Sudanese case, this risk is extremely clear. On one side stands the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the central institution of the official security architecture of the Sudanese state. On the other side stand the RSF militias, which have broken away from state authority, developed independent military, economic, and political capacity, grown stronger through external support networks, and become associated with grave violations against civilians. Placing these two actors on the same plane makes it difficult to understand the nature of the Sudanese crisis.

Humanitarian discourse is often accompanied by calls for “equal distance from the parties.” Yet in Sudan, the issue is not a conflict between two equally legitimate actors. The issue is a struggle between the continuity of sovereign state institutions and the attempt of a non-state militia structure to fragment Sudan’s political and territorial integrity. For this reason, the humanitarian sensitivities of the international community should not be considered separately from the necessity of defending state sovereignty. The protection of civilians, the delivery of aid, and the investigation of war crimes are, of course, essential. Yet none of these should result in the normalization of the RSF as a legitimate political-military actor.

Lasting peace in Sudan cannot be built upon an order in which independent armed power centers continue to exist outside state authority. Such an or-

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der would create a fragmented sphere of sovereignty under the appearance of a ceasefire. Therefore, humanitarian diplomacy must be considered together with the reconstruction of the state and the prevention of armed structures from operating outside the national security architecture.

### **The State’s Struggle for Survival**

Sudan today is not only experiencing a civil war. It is waging an existential struggle to preserve state institutions, national sovereignty, and the common future of its people. At the center of this struggle stand the SAF. The current role of the SAF is not limited to representing a military front. The SAF is the bearer of the institutional continuity, territorial integrity, and sovereign claim of the Sudanese state.

The most fundamental element that enables states to survive in times of crisis is the existence of legitimate security institutions. In the Suda-

## The RSF is a striking example of how non-state armed actors can become institutionalized through external support, how they can survive through a war economy, and how they can erode national sovereignty

nese case, the significance of the SAF emerges precisely at this point. The expansion of the RSF as a non-state military force is not only a challenge against the government; it also means the fragmentation of the Sudanese state's monopoly over security. The defining feature of the modern state is the concentration of the legitimate use of force under state authority. The RSF's independent military structure, access to economic resources, external support networks, and territorial control directly target this principle.

For this reason, the war in Sudan cannot be simply described as a "conflict between the army and a paramilitary force." The real issue here is whether Sudan can continue to exist as a single state. If a structure such as the RSF – externally supported, based on ethnic and regional networks, and strengthened by cross-border connections – obtains a permanent military and political space, Sudan's future will no longer be only a question of a weak central state; the country will face the risks of de facto partition, a war economy, and permanent militia rule.

In this respect, the SAF's struggle is both military and institutional as well as historical in nature. The retaking of the capital, Khartoum, the reestablishment of state authority in central regions, and the removal of the RSF from many strategic areas demonstrate the Sudanese people's demand for security, order, and the idea of the state. The return of civilians to Khartoum and to areas where the army has reestablished control is also an indication of military success and of the social need for state authority.

Of course, the Sudanese people do not want an endless war. Yet the people's demand for peace does not mean the legitimization of non-state armed structures. Genuine peace for Sudan can only be possible in an order where parallel military forces such as the RSF do not remain independent actors outside the national army, where all armed capacity is brought under the control of the state, and where the political process is rebuilt through sovereign state institutions.

### Militia Character of the RSF and the Threat to Sovereignty

The threat posed by the RSF to Sudan not only stems from its military attacks. The deeper problem is the RSF's attempt, as a non-state armed structure, to build a parallel power capacity across military, economic, political, and social spheres. This structure operates outside Sudan's national security architecture, eliminates state authority in the areas it



controls, and sustains its war capacity through external support networks.

The militia character of the RSF is one of the defining elements of the war in Sudan. This structure does not act like a regular national army. It operates as a network of violence based on ethnic, tribal, economic, and regional ties; it exerts pressure on civilians, uses displacement as a method of warfare, and is associated with allegations of looting, forced displacement, arbitrary executions, and sexual violence in the areas under its control. What has happened in Darfur demonstrates the most destructive consequence of this militia character.

The threat the RSF poses to the state should be understood on three levels. The first is the military. The RSF seeks to break the Sudanese state's monopoly over security. The second is the political level. The RSF creates an alternative field of authority in the areas it controls and effectively fragments Sudan's central state structure. The third is the geopolitical level. The RSF's external support networks transform Sudan into an arena of regional influence struggles.

For this reason, the RSF issue cannot be viewed only as an extension of Sudanese domestic politics. The RSF is a striking example of how non-state

armed actors can become institutionalized through external support, how they can survive through a war economy, and how they can erode national sovereignty. The military and political entrenchment of the RSF in Sudan would create a dangerous precedent both for Sudan and for the wider region. Such an outcome would offer external actors an opportunity to weaken sovereign state institutions by supporting militia structures inside a country.

From the perspective of Sudan's future, the normalization of the RSF is unacceptable. Any possible inclusion of the RSF in the political process can only be considered on the conditions of disarmament, accountability, and subordination to state authority. Otherwise, this structure will turn every ceasefire into an opportunity to re-arm and reposition itself. Sudan's past experiences clearly show that parallel armed structures do not bring peace; on the contrary, they make the state more fragile.

## **Internationalization of the War and External Support Networks**

One of the most important dimensions of the war in Sudan is the gradual internationalization of the conflict. It is not possible for the RSF to sustain a war capacity of this scale and duration solely with resources from within Sudan. The issues of weapons, ammunition, unmanned aerial vehicles, logistical support, cross-border transit routes, and foreign mercenaries demonstrate that

the war is being fed by external support networks.

At this point, the alleged support provided by the United Arab Emirates to the RSF is one of the most critical and controversial dimensions of the Sudan war. Issues such as arms shipments, logistical routes, drone capacity, financial connections, and the transfer of foreign fighters to the battlefield directly deepen Sudan's sovereignty crisis. The continuity of the RSF's military capacity cannot be explained without external support. This situation moves the war in Sudan away from the category of a classic civil war and brings it closer to the dynamics of proxy warfare.

External support networks damage Sudan's sovereignty in two ways. First, they prolong the conflict by sustaining the RSF's war capacity. Second, they transform Sudanese territory into an arena of regional power competition. This means that the fate of the Sudanese people becomes subject to the calculations of external actors. The future of a sovereign state cannot be left to influence struggles conducted through militias.

The involvement of foreign fighters and mercenary elements in the conflict makes the nature of the war even more dangerous. These elements not only increase the level of violence in the war but also turn Sudanese territory into a transit zone for regional armed networks. Considering militia mobility along the Darfur, Chad, Libya, Central African Republic, and Sahel axis, the risk that the war in Su-

dan will merge with regional economies of violence is extremely high.

The international community must make a clear choice here. It will either support Sudan's sovereignty and legitimate state institutions, or it will ignore the capacity of externally supported militia structures to fragment the country. Ignoring the RSF's external support networks under the appearance of neutrality effectively serves the weakening of the Sudanese state. Therefore, every actor that seeks peace in Sudan must first advocate the termination of external support to the RSF, the closure of cross-border logistical routes, and the cessation of the financing of militia violence.

### **Darfur: Center of Humanitarian Crimes and Risk of Fragmentation**

Darfur reveals the most brutal face of the Sudan war. The RSF's activities in Darfur must be read not only as a struggle for military control, but also as a strategy of systematic violence against civilians, ethnic targeting, mass displacement, and the destruction of the social fabric. What has happened in Darfur clearly demonstrates why the RSF represents an unacceptable threat to Sudan's future.

Developments in and around el-Fasher have shown that Darfur is not only a local conflict zone. El-Fasher holds a critical position for Sudan's territorial integrity as the political, humanitarian, and strategic center of Darfur. The siege of this city, the trapping of civilians between hun-

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ger and violence, the obstruction of humanitarian aid, and the targeting of the civilian population reveal the fundamental character of the RSF's method of warfare. Attacks against civilians in Darfur show that the war is being waged both on the front line and against society itself.

The violence in Darfur also increases the risk of Sudan's fragmentation. If the RSF establishes a permanent military-political space in Darfur, Sudan may face a de facto fragmented sovereignty structure. This would mean the repetition of a Libya-like scenario in Sudan. Indeed, weak central authority, externally supported armed groups, regional proxy wars, smuggling economies, and permanent instability are among the greatest risks of such a process. Sudan being dragged into such a future would have severe consequences for the Sudanese people and for the entire region.

The violations in Darfur should also determine the international commu-

## The weakening of Sudan's coastal security, the destabilization of port infrastructure, and the erosion of state authority in coastal areas could directly affect the security balance in the Red Sea

nity's attitude toward the RSF. Crimes such as systematic attacks against civilians, allegations of ethnically targeted violence, mass executions, sexual violence, looting, and forced displacement must not be overshadowed by any political bargaining agenda. There can be no peace without accountability. The investigation of crimes committed by the RSF, the punishment of perpetrators, and the protection of victims are prerequisites for lasting peace in Sudan.

Darfur is not only the symbol of the humanitarian crisis in Sudan. Darfur is the center of the Sudanese state's struggle for sovereignty, the protection of society against militia violence, and the defense of national unity against the risk of the country's fragmentation.

### Regional Security Dimension: How Would Sudan's Collapse Affect the Region?

Sudan's geopolitical position carries the effects of the war far beyond national borders. Sudan is a strategic

passageway between the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, North Africa, and Central Africa. Therefore, the weakening of state authority in Sudan would not only generate an internal political crisis; it would also have the capacity to shake the regional security architecture.

First, Sudan is critically important for Red Sea security. The Red Sea is one of the world's most sensitive routes in terms of global trade, energy transportation, and maritime security. The weakening of Sudan's coastal security, the destabilization of port infrastructure, and the erosion of state authority in coastal areas could directly affect the security balance in the Red Sea. Considering piracy off the coast of Somalia, the Houthis in Yemen, tensions along the Bab al-Mandab line, and competition in East Africa, Sudan's instability would add a new layer of fragility to Red Sea security.

Second, the war in Sudan is of great importance for the Horn of Africa. Countries such as Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti already operate within a complex regional environment shaped by security challenges, border disputes, ethnic tensions, questions of sea access, and external intervention. Sudan's fragmentation or descent into permanent militia rule could further deepen security problems in the Horn of Africa. Arms trafficking, militia mobility, migration pressure, and the proxy competition of external actors could threaten regional stability.

Third, the Sahel connection is extremely critical. Western Sudan is connected to Chad, Libya, the Central African Republic, and the Sahel belt. This axis has long been an operating space for armed groups, smuggling networks, mercenaries, and war economies. The establishment of a permanent RSF control zone in Darfur could allow these regional armed networks to take deeper root inside Sudan. This, in turn, could turn Sudan into the eastern gateway of instability in the Sahel.

Fourth, Sudan's collapse would create a dangerous precedent for the norm of state sovereignty in Africa. If an externally supported militia structure gains permanent political-military status by waging war against the central state, this would generate a risky model for other fragile states on the continent. Many African countries already face non-state armed actors, cross-border insurgent networks, and pressures of external intervention. The normalization of the RSF in Sudan could send these actors the message that status can be achieved through arms.

The Sudan war is not Sudan's war alone. Sudan's struggle for sovereignty is directly connected to the future of the regional order. The SAF's struggle is not only a national defense effort but also important for the preservation of regional stability. The reestablishment of state authority in Sudan would prevent the expansion of security vacuums across a wide geography stretching from the Red Sea to the Sahel.

## Responsibility of the International Community

The international community's approach to Sudan must be clearer, more principled, and more realistic. Humanitarian aid is certainly necessary to alleviate the suffering of the Sudanese people. Yet humanitarian aid alone is not a peace strategy. Aid convoys, food assistance, and medical intervention may alleviate the consequences of the crisis, but they cannot eliminate its causes as long as they do not stop the fragmentation of the state.

A realistic international approach to Sudan must have three basic elements. First, external support to the RSF must be cut off. Without stopping the flow of weapons, ammunition, drones, financing, logistics, and foreign fighters, it is not possible to end the war in Sudan. Second, the legitimate institutions of the Sudanese state must be supported. Without state capacity, humanitarian aid cannot be sustained, security cannot be ensured, and a political transition cannot be managed. Third, accountability mechanisms must be activated for the grave violations committed by the RSF. Impunity is an invitation to new crimes.

The approach of "equal distance from the parties" is insufficient. International law does not place the state and a militia structure on the same plane of legitimacy. Peace in Sudan can become possible not by recognizing the RSF as an independent military force, but by dismantling this structure, disarming it, and subordinating it to state

## The most appropriate approach for Sudan is to support its sovereignty, cut off external support for the RSF, protect civilians, bring the crimes committed in Darfur before accountability mechanisms, and support the institutional reconstruction of the Sudanese state

authority. Every diplomatic formula that rewards non-state armed actors lays the groundwork for future wars.

The international community must defend Sudan's sovereignty while also supporting civilian protection, humanitarian access, and legal accountability. These two objectives are not opposed to one another. On the contrary, they complement each other. The protection of civilians requires the reconstruction of state authority. The reconstruction of the state requires the end of militia violence and external intervention.

### Conclusion

The Sudan war cannot be viewed only as a humanitarian catastrophe or a temporary security crisis. This war is the Sudanese state's struggle for survival. Focusing solely on the humanitarian dimension renders invisible Sudan's struggle to survive as

a sovereign state. Yet this is precisely the issue at the heart of the Sudanese crisis: Will Sudan remain a single sovereign state, or will it turn into a war geography fragmented by externally supported militia networks?

In this context, the SAF's struggle aims to protect Sudan's national unity, state institutions, and the common future of society. The RSF, in contrast, is not only a military rival; it is a destructive militia structure that erodes Sudan's sovereignty, imposes heavy costs on civilians, brings external intervention into the country, and threatens regional stability. Therefore, the prerequisite for lasting peace in Sudan is the end of the RSF's existence as an independent military and political force.

The Sudanese people deserve peace. But this peace cannot be built on the absence of the state. Peace is possible not through the normalization of militias, but through the reconstruction of state authority. Peace is possible not when externally supported armed networks determine Sudan's destiny, but when the Sudanese people determine their future through sovereign institutions. Peace can be established not only at ceasefire tables, but through the restoration of sovereignty, law, accountability, and national unity.

The international community's view of Sudan must change. Sudan is not only a crisis country waiting for aid. It is defending its sovereignty, trying to keep its state standing, and holding critical importance for the stability of the regional order. Sudan's col-

lapse would deeply affect stability in the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, and Northeast Africa. Its survival, however, would be a strategic gain not only for the Sudanese people, but for the entire region.

Today, the most appropriate approach for Sudan is to support its

sovereignty, cut off external support for the RSF, protect civilians, bring the crimes committed in Darfur before accountability mechanisms, and support the institutional reconstruction of the Sudanese state. In the end, the path to peace in Sudan runs through the strengthening of the state. ■



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