

Reconsidering Cairo's Approach to the Sudanese Civil War

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Since the outbreak of the Sudanese crisis in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), Egypt finds itself in a highly complex situation. Historically and geographically [linked to Sudan \(https://www.thecairoreview.com/tahrir-forum/crisis-in-sudan-what-does-it-mean-for-egypt/\)](https://www.thecairoreview.com/tahrir-forum/crisis-in-sudan-what-does-it-mean-for-egypt/), Cairo views the stability of its southern neighbor as vital to its interests. Despite intense diplomatic efforts, Cairo appears to face a difficult choice between neutrality and supporting one side at the expense of the other.

On one hand, the SAF—led by Burhan—exhibit Islamist tendencies, yet they are the last relatively cohesive national institution in the country since the collapse of Bashir's regime. On the other hand, the RSF is a militia based on tribal foundations and supported by some regional actors, making them unreliable for building a democratic and free Sudan.

In 2023, one of the authors [conducted an interview \(https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2892036\)](https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2892036) with Lieutenant Colonel Chuck DeVore—a former U.S. Army intelligence officer and Special Assistant for Foreign Affairs at the U.S. Department of Defense—about the situation in Sudan. He stated that, “Egypt can play a bigger role in Sudan if it wants, as Cairo has a long history and extended geography with its southern neighbor.” He called on the region not to wait for an American initiative to contain the Sudan crisis, saying, “Do not expect much from the Biden administration... The Sudan crisis is an opportunity for active regional players, especially Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, to address the region's crises.”

However, [recent indications \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/10/sudans-rsf-accuses-egypt-of-involvement-in-air-strikes-on-its-forces\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/10/sudans-rsf-accuses-egypt-of-involvement-in-air-strikes-on-its-forces) suggest what appears to be a shift in Egypt's stance toward supporting

the SAF, even if such moves have been tentative. Moreover, U.S. rhetoric against the RSF has become significantly more targeted in recent months, culminating in Former Secretary of State Blinken's **recent announcement** (<https://www.state.gov/genocide-determination-in-sudan-and-imposing-accountability-measures/>) that the United States had determined the RSF has committed genocide. With some American encouragement from the current administration, Egypt's apparent shift could evolve into decisive intervention, which could help push towards a conclusion to a so-far intractable conflict.

Egypt and Sudan – A Shared History

Sudan, which shares a 1,276 km border with Egypt, has been more than just a neighbor; it has been a historical partner through multiple eras. From the Ottoman-Egyptian rule to Sudanese independence, the relations between the two countries have been deeply intertwined. As such, any instability in Sudan directly affects Egypt's national security and vital resources, particularly Nile water.

Prior to the outbreak of the war between the Sudanese army leader, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and his former deputy, the leader of the RSF, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), Egypt and Sudan conducted joint military exercises and coordinated their stances regarding Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam on the Nile. In March 2021, for example, the Egyptian army announced that Egyptian and Sudanese forces had conducted a series of **military exercises** (

Since April 2023, Sudan has been experiencing a severe military crisis that began with escalating tensions between the SAF, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the RSF, led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti). At the time of the conflict's onset, the Egyptian army had forces stationed at the northern Merowe base, highlighting Egypt's concerns for the stability of its southern neighbor. Yet these tensions escalated into an armed conflict that caused significant destruction in the capital, Khartoum, and other cities, along with a worsening humanitarian crisis.

While Egypt's official stance was to maintain neutrality, tensions between Egypt and the RSF surfaced almost immediately. That April, the RSF released a video showing **captured Egyptian soldiers** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudans-paramilitary-force-shares-video-they-claim-shows-surrendered-egyptian-2023-04-15/>) amidst the fighting between the Sudanese army and the RSF. The soldiers were later handed over to the Egyptian government through the International Red Cross.

Hemedti's forces accused Egyptian aircraft of bombing RSF camps and, in a video, Hemedti accused the Egyptian army of **attacking RSF positions in Jabal Moya, Sennar State** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/head-sudans-rsf-accuses-egypt-being-involved-airstrikes-groups-troops-2024-10-09/>). However, in September, the Sudanese army denied acquiring K-8 aircraft from Egypt, asserting that it had owned squadrons of this aircraft model for over 20 years.

In response, the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs **issued a statement** (<https://abcnews.go.com/International/sudans-rsf-paramilitary-group-chief-accuses-egypt-involvement/story?id=114673036>) denying the Egyptian army's involvement in the ongoing battles in Sudan and called on the international community to verify the evidence supporting Hemedti's claims. The statement emphasized that "Egypt is committed to the security, stability, and unity of Sudan, both in land and people, and will spare no effort to provide all possible support to Sudan in addressing the severe damages caused by the war." Some observers argue that the RSF's accusations against Egypt are part of Hemedti's attempts to justify the setbacks his forces have suffered, especially after the Sudanese army regained strength and launched successful strikes in areas held by the RSF.

In the aftermath of this early incident, Cairo has attempted to avoid taking sides. Even when RSF militias stormed the Merowe base, where Egyptian forces were stationed as part of joint exercises before the war and announced the capture of Egyptian personnel, Cairo opted for diplomatic pathways to resolve the crisis.

Cairo participated in negotiations mediated by the United States and Saudi Arabia, which began shortly after the war erupted in April 2023, aiming to bridge gaps between the two sides and end the fighting. In **July 2023** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/egypt-launch-fresh-sudan-mediation-attempt-during-summit-2023-07-13/>), Cairo invited neighboring heads of state to a summit, and in **July 2024** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudanese-political-factions-meet-cairo-with-little-prospect-peace-2024-07-06/>), it invited Sudanese civil and political forces to meet in Cairo to reach an agreement to end the war. Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdel Atty **stated during the conference of Sudanese civil and political forces** (<https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/1234/526704/Egypt/Foreign-Affairs/Solution-to-Sudan-crisis-must-be-Sudaneseled-Egypt.aspx>) that any political solution “must be based on a purely Sudanese vision, without external pressure,” while emphasizing the importance of “the unity of the army and its role in protecting the nation.”

In October, statements from the RSF in Sudan again brought Egypt’s role in the country into focus. The RSF launched a sharp attack on Egypt and, for the first time, claimed the existence of “Egyptian prisoners” who allegedly participated alongside the SAF in the ongoing war.

The RSF statement alleged that “official Egypt has not altered its stance in favor of military institutions and regimes in general, falling into contradiction by supporting the Sudanese army, which has been completely hijacked by the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan.” The statement added, “The Egyptian government has never ceased providing military support to the army, including weapons, ammunition, aircraft bombs, training, and technical, political, diplomatic, and media support.”

Seeking an End to the Conflict

As the political landscape has shifted dramatically in the Middle East, marked by the collapse of the last Ba'athist regime in the region (Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria) and with attention shifting to the larger conflict between Iran and Israel ahead of President Trump’s return to the White House on January 20, Sudan’s fierce and ongoing conflict between the SAF and the RSF militias shows no signs of reaching a conclusion.

Research (<https://theconversation.com/sudans-civil-war-has-left-at-least-62-000-dead-by-our-estimate-but-the-true-figure-could-be-far-higher-242073>) conducted by four American universities estimated that approximately 130,000 Sudanese have died, directly and indirectly, during the current war, which has been ongoing for 18 months. The research considered the current conflict in Sudan as one of the deadliest globally, but it remains among the least covered by media, despite its alarmingly high casualty numbers.

The repercussions of the war have placed enormous pressure on Cairo. The influx of Sudanese migrants and refugees has strained Egypt’s limited resources, caused numerous societal crises, and escalated anti-immigrant rhetoric. Additionally, there are security concerns about the infiltration of criminal elements and human trafficking networks across Egypt’s borders. Sudan had also served as a **haven for members of Islamic groups** (<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/01/the-egypt-sudan-border-a-story-of-unfulfilled-promise?lang=en¢er=middle-east>) who fled Egypt after 2013, as Bashir’s regime provided them with a safe refuge. Moreover, Ethiopian and regional interventions supporting the RSF have added further burdens on Cairo.

The situation has been further complicated by regional and international interventions in Sudan. Reports indicate Russian support for the RSF through Wagner mercenaries, while the United States **recently accused Russia** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/us-accuses-russia-funding-both-sides-sudans-war-2025-01-07/>) of fueling the Sudanese conflict and supporting the warring parties. Iran reportedly supports the Sudanese army, while

Ethiopia, which remains in tension with Egypt over the Grand Renaissance Dam, offers diplomatic backing to the RSF.

This dynamic places Cairo in a precarious position. The continuation of the war threatens to escalate security and humanitarian issues on Egypt's southern border at a time when the country is already grappling with significant challenges, including the Gaza war and instability in Libya, which border Egypt to the east and west, respectively. Allowing Sudan to fall under the control of externally-backed tribal militias represents a direct threat to Egyptian national security. The presence of extremist elements and armed militias near Egypt's borders heightens security risks, especially with the possibility of infiltration by criminal networks and human traffickers.

On the Sudanese army's side, its alliance with Islamic groups fighting alongside it has raised concerns. Reports of Iranian support, particularly after [Burhan's visit to Tehran](#) (https://x.com/_hudson/status/1746215596029788516), underline the involvement of both Russia and Iran in backing different sides of the Sudanese conflict. This will inevitably prolong the war and further destabilize the region, adding significant burdens to Egypt and leaving Cairo with difficult options.

U.S. Measures Against the RSF

The United States has taken an increasingly firm stance against the RSF and its leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), due to severe human rights violations committed by these forces. In September 2023, [Washington imposed sanctions](#) (<https://www.state.gov/actions-against-senior-rapid-support-forces-commanders-in-sudan/>) on RSF leaders, including Abdul Rahim Hamdan Dagalo, Hemedti's deputy, and Abdul Rahman Jumma, the RSF leader in West Darfur, accusing them of extrajudicial killings, torture, and other human rights abuses.

Recently, former U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared that the RSF and allied Arab militias had committed crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. He affirmed the United States' commitment to holding those responsible for these atrocities accountable. U.S. sanctions were also imposed on Hemedti himself. In November 2024, the U.S. Congress adopted a [resolution](#) (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-resolution/1328/text>) classifying the RSF's and allied militias' violations in Darfur as "genocide," calling for accountability for those responsible.

And in December 2024, reports indicated that the Biden administration was preparing to impose additional sanctions on the RSF, its leader Hemedti, and affiliated companies as part of its efforts to hold those involved in ongoing violations in Sudan accountable. This alignment suggests that Egypt's initial cautious stance resonates with the U.S. position to a significant extent. Blinken's subsequent [announcement](#) (<https://www.state.gov/genocide-determination-in-sudan-and-imposing-accountability-measures/>) that the RSF had committed genocide has further confirmed this hardening of U.S. policy. While it remains to be seen which direction the Trump administration will take in this respect, the stage is set for further punitive actions should the new administration choose to do so.

Cairo's Dilemma

Cairo, which has taken a cautious approach to avoid being drawn into the war, reportedly provides logistical support to the Sudanese army. Yet with this strategy, Egypt finds itself caught between "a rock and a hard place." The continuation of the war exacerbates the humanitarian disaster in the south. At the same time, Sudan's fall into the hands of unruly tribal militias backed by adversarial forces poses a severe threat to Egypt on all levels and will amplify the regional challenges Egypt faces. Meanwhile, within the Sudanese army, cracks have appeared in its alliance with Islamic factions, evident in the [recent verbal conflicts](#) (<https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1758969-السودان-حرب-كلامية-محتدمة-البرهان-وقبادات-إخوانية>) between Muslim Brotherhood leaders and Burhan.

Cairo should take bolder steps to support the Sudanese army and ensure the cessation of regional support for the

RSF. Strengthening coordination with the United States and European countries would be essential to impose stricter sanctions on armed militias, providing greater leverage towards ending the conflict.

Egypt can further enhance its cooperation with neighboring countries—such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE—to coordinate regional efforts to stabilize Sudan, though these efforts will undoubtedly have their own complications. In the event the war ends, Egypt can play a key role in rebuilding Sudan and ensuring the stability of its political and security institutions.

While Egypt finds itself facing tough choices in addressing the Sudanese crisis, and despite the cautious approach it has adopted so far, decisive intervention may be necessary to protect Egyptian and regional interests. Securing Sudan's stability is not only a humanitarian necessity but also a strategic factor for maintaining Egypt's security and the security of the southern Red Sea amid increasing regional and international complexities. ❖

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