



Tailored Risk Management

Geopolitical Analysis

**Sudanese Civil War: How  
the conflict is Shaping  
East Africa**

## Background and Overview

In its recent history, Sudan has seen almost constant conflict within its borders, with the region of Darfur being particularly volatile. Since April 2023 a fight for power has been ongoing between rival factions led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (commonly known as “Hemedti”). This was originally centred around Khartoum and the tri-city area, however in recent months, the fighting has intensified in other areas, particularly the region of Darfur which stretches from Kurdufan westwards toward Chad.

The foundation for this conflict was set following the ousting of military dictator Omar al-Bashir and the creation of a military junta in early 2019. A power-sharing agreement was consequently signed between military and civilian bodies. This alongside the promise of elections in 2023 sparked some hopes for reform and stability among the Sudanese people. However, in October 2021 the Sudanese armed forces (SAF), led by al-Burhan and supported by Hemedti and his Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led a coup which toppled the transitional government and reformed a military dictatorship. The RSF is a paramilitary group al-Bashir set up to support military operations in Darfur. Primarily composed of ethnically Arab soldiers, the force was placed under Hemedti’s command in 2013.

Since then, Hemedti and the RSF have rapidly grown in strength. They have received support from the Russian Wagner Group to bolster their capabilities and have gained operational experience in conflicts ranging from Yemen to Libya. These measures have significantly increased their power base. Hemedti’s main source of wealth comes from his control over the gold mines in Darfur, which he has diversified into property and livestock. Much of his wealth is kept in the UAE and he has close ties with Dubai. Al-Burhan is a member of the SAF and became leader of the Transitional Military Council following the coup in 2019 and has held control of Sudan since. Both men receive large amounts of support from Russia, with the RSF in particular having close ties to the Wagner Group. Both Hemedti and al-Burhan have been accused of crimes against humanity in Darfur and Khartoum, with Hemedti also accused of atrocities in Yemen.

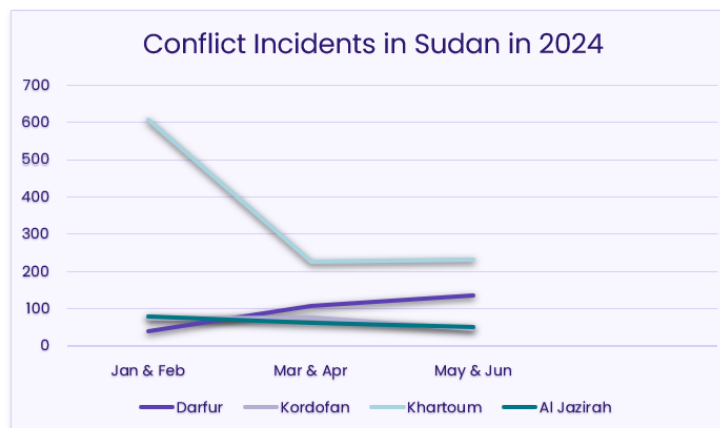


Figure 1. Reported Conflict incidents in Sudan from January – June 2024 (Data source: ACLED)



## Impacts on Sudan

Since the civil war began in April 2023 over 8 million people have been displaced across Sudan, creating a wide range of issues for the nation. These include the destruction of the economy as well as increased levels of malnourishment, particularly in children. The devastating effects of conflict have left the entire country at risk of famine, as the fighting impacts some of Sudan's most fertile areas and both warlords seek to feed their armies. The war has already significantly damaged the economy, with estimates from the World Bank suggesting Sudan's economy shrunk by 12 per cent in 2023. The World Bank estimates a further 18 per cent reduction in GDP in 2024 which shows the continued damage this conflict is causing. In comparison, the conflicts in Syria and Yemen led to a decline of roughly 5 per cent per year in those nation's economies. The Sudanese estimates therefore raise far-reaching concerns for its long-term stability and prospects for recovery.

The conflict has been particularly damaging to the major urban centres of Khartoum and Omdurman, either side of the Nile, as well as Darfur. Khartoum in particular was once a major hub for commerce and trade within Sudan but now has been decimated with many of its commercial areas being abandoned. The sheer devastation of this conflict to the country will likely make it more difficult for any sort of quick recovery to take place.

Infrastructure damage will likely make Sudan a difficult area to operate in for the foreseeable future. This combined with the financial demands created by other conflicts, specifically Gaza and Ukraine further exacerbate this. As mentioned above, the twin commercial hubs of Khartoum and Omdurman have been severely damaged by the conflict and this extends to much of Sudan's infrastructure. Aerial images of Sudan show the vast destruction of many towns and transportation links across the country. This has made operations increasingly difficult for organisations, particularly in the provision of aid to remote regions in Darfur. Furthermore, the damage has also spread to many facilities that provide medical care, clean water and electricity, making Darfur extremely challenging to operate in. Outside of key strategic areas protected by the warring factions, such as Hemedti's gold mines, it is likely that any economic activity involving third parties will be extremely difficult for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the collapse of the economy has seen increased levels of crime as people turn to whatever methods they can to survive. This has, in turn, increased operational costs and created significant barriers to conducting business in Sudan, making private security often essential to facilitate operations.

Alongside the economic impacts, starvation in Sudan is growing in prevalence. It is believed that some 16 million people are facing extreme levels of hunger and there are nearly 230,000 severely malnourished children. If the conflict continues in its current state and aid is unable to reach those in need of it, it is likely the civilian death toll will continue to rise. Alongside this, there are rising levels of disease in Sudan with the United Nations reporting almost 10,000 cholera cases



and over 200 deaths this year alone. With the war destroying between 70 and 80 per cent of hospitals in conflict areas, the majority of those in need have no way of receiving treatment at present. This problem is only compounded by the operational barriers faced by aid organisations.

## Impact on the Wider Region

Prolonged conflict in Sudan will likely lead to regional destabilisation thanks to large numbers of refugees fleeing the country. By the end of April 2024, the UN estimated that almost 2 million people had fled Sudan for neighbouring countries, with the majority of these fleeing to Egypt, Chad and South Sudan. The displacement of such a large number of people will place an additional strain on neighbouring countries like Egypt, Chad, and South Sudan, which are already grappling with the challenge of providing aid to their citizens. Companies operating in nations such as Chad and South Sudan should be particularly aware of this influx of refugees as their arrival is likely to lead to increased opportunistic crime as well as the chance of inter-ethnic conflict. There have already been reports of political violence in the Northern areas of South Sudan bordering West Kordofan as well as in East Chad. While violence in Chad is isolated, Aljazeera has reported that Sudanese refugees are frequently being attacked as people in Chad see them as an extra burden on already scarce resources. As reports of resource-related violence increase, companies operating in areas experiencing a refugee influx should remain vigilant, as this influx could potentially lead to further violence.

Furthermore, roughly 120,000 individuals have fled to Ethiopia, a country with its own ongoing conflicts. At present the conflict in the region of Tigray, which borders Sudan, has led to many people being displaced in Ethiopia, with some having fled into Sudan. The return of 120,000 people to Ethiopia during this period of heightened tension could further exacerbate ethnic and wider political tensions.

Though Ethiopia itself does not have a coastline, many of its neighbours border the Red Sea, the world's busiest trade route. If the conflict were to reignite within Ethiopia, there could be significant further disruption to these routes, similar to that caused by Houthi groups in Yemen in recent months. The peace agreement between Ethiopia and some of the major powers in Tigray is fragile, as there has continued to be considerable violence within the area since the November 2022 ceasefire. Ethnic violence has been reported by many bodies within Tigray as well as the bordering region of Amhara. UN reports and those from Human Rights Watch also talk of particularly harsh treatment of Eritrean refugees, often resulting in their detention and expulsion by local forces. There has been equally harsh treatment reported by the UN by Eritrean armed forces against the citizens of Tigray. In an area that is still experiencing conflict and when many refugees that had fled Tigray to Sudan may now find themselves forced back across the border there is an increased chance of violence in the area. Should additional strains be placed on the Ethiopian government, its already stretched resources would need to support a growing refugee population, potentially leaving the nation vulnerable to exploitation by neighbouring



countries. Eritrean forces, which continue to operate within Tigray, may seize the opportunity to expand their control if they perceive the Ethiopian government is overstretched, particularly with ongoing conflicts in Amhara and Oromia. Such escalation of conflict near the Red Sea also raises serious concerns about the security of vital shipping routes and port infrastructure.

A further concern in the region from this possible destabilisation is the rise of extremism. The Sahel region, stretching from the Atlantic coast in the west to the Red Sea in the east, is currently experiencing high levels of violence and terrorism, with the conflict in Sudan contributing to this instability. However, in the Western parts of the Sahel groups such as Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have been growing in power and increasingly active since 2010. If nations such as Chad, which are already at risk from increased terrorist activity, become more vulnerable then the already violent region may see further increases. Recent data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) suggests that the nation is seeing comparatively less violence than its neighbours and is at present the only nation in the Sahel region to not lose territory to extremist groups. However, with high levels of violence in Darfur and North-eastern Nigeria, extremist groups could take advantage of the instability and increase their operations. Among the most poorest countries in the world, facing its own insurgency in the north, being the 7th poorest country in the world, it is unlikely that Chad would be able to resist any such growth in violence caused by destabilisation from the conflict in Sudan. Chad is an area rich in mineral wealth that is often heavily reliant on foreign companies to make use of. In 2022 over 75% of Chad's exports were made up of crude oil and a further 20% in gold. These forms of mineral wealth are often targeted by extremist groups as a way to fund their activities. Energy and Mineral companies that may wish to operate in this region should be mindful of these factors if they are to mitigate the risks that they face.

## Impact Outside of Africa

A further growth in migration across the Mediterranean at a time of hyper-awareness of immigration levels across Europe could further lead to a rise in the popularity of right-wing populist parties. The results of EU elections held on 06-09 June show that this is already happening in many Western European nations. Despite the lack of media attention this conflict has been receiving, it is situated in an area that traditionally sees high quantities of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia are major source countries for migrants crossing into the likes of Italy and Greece. As the conflict worsens and more people are displaced a proportion of these will head for Europe. In a year with shock elections such as France's as well as those in the UK and Belgium, a further rise in immigration could bolster support for nationalist parties. The growing popularity of the AFD in Germany and Le Pen in France, alongside increasingly hostile stances towards immigration among British parties highlights the importance of monitoring migration flows into Europe. The positive results for Labour in the UK and the French left should not drive complacency towards these issues.



## Prospects of Peace?

At present the chances of peace in the near future seem to be minimal. As mentioned above this war is being funded by a variety of outside actors as well as the vast wealth of the leaders, in particular, Hemedti. This financial backing allows both sides to continue the conflict well beyond what Sudan's resources would allow. This separation between the citizens of Sudan and its leaders will foster greater hardship and suffering for these people. Alongside financial aid, there is also direct military aid being offered in some situations. For example, there is evidence of mercenaries from Russia's Wagner group having operated in Sudan supporting the RSF. However, this has been denied by the RSF and Russia. The course of the conflict so far would also suggest that both sides are willing to be drawn into a long struggle. Despite this, the RSF does seem to have the upper hand. Hemedti's smaller, but more mobile force has almost taken control over large areas of Darfur and has also seen successes in the main urban areas of Khartoum and Omdurman. However, there is still heavy fighting here as the SAF seek to push back into the nation's capital. The final aspect that will likely see this war drag on is the existential nature of it for the major players. Both leaders likely realise that losing this war will damage their wealth and possibly even result in their deaths. Alongside this, the purging of their families and support bases would also be likely as has been seen so frequently in other conflicts. Thus, as long as they are able to keep forces in the field and protect their interests both sides will likely do so. This is particularly relevant as the longer this war drags on the more severe the effects will be and the harder it will be for the region to recover following its conclusion.



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