

## INTERNATIONAL ACTORS AND THE SUDANESE CONFLICT: EGYPT AND SAUDI ARABIA IN PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

This study explored the contradictory roles of Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the protracted and heavily devastating Sudanese conflict (2023–present). This conflict clearly represents one of the twenty-first century's most catastrophic humanitarian calamities as a result of the number of deaths (over 150,000) and displaced (over 14 million Sudanese are displaced). Using a mixed-methods approach combining document analysis and process tracing, this study reveals that Egypt's support for the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) stems from Nile water security imperatives and regime survival anxieties, while Saudi Arabia balances between conflict mediation and strategic interests in Red Sea dominance. Both nations have exacerbated the conflict despite peace initiatives, transforming Sudan into a regional proxy battlefield. Findings emphasize the urgent need for coordinated African Union-led diplomacy to neutralize destructive external interference and prioritize Sudanese sovereignty.

**Keywords:** African Security, Egypt Foreign Policy, Proxy Warfare, Sudan Conflict, Saudi Arabia Foreign Policy

### 1 Introduction

The Sudanese conflict has evolved into one of the most protracted and complex crises in the Horn of Africa, characterized by political instability, armed violence, humanitarian emergencies, and deep-rooted governance challenges. Since the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019, Sudan has experienced recurring episodes of civil unrest, military coups, and fierce competition between rival factions, including the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

These internal struggles have created a vacuum that has invited significant attention and involvement from regional and international actors, particularly Saudi Arabia and Egypt. According to Ahmed (2021), "the post-Bashir transition in Sudan opened new geopolitical space that neighbouring states were quick to occupy, each pursuing its interests under the guise of stabilization." This external involvement reflects not only concerns for regional stability but also ambitions for influence over Sudan's political and economic trajectory.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt, both strategic players in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, have deep-rooted interests in Sudan. Geopolitical calculations, economic ties, security concerns, and ideological alignments have shaped their involvement. International Crisis Group (2023) notes that "Saudi Arabia's interests in Sudan are tied to Red Sea maritime security and investment expansion under Vision 2030," while Egypt's motivations revolve around water security and political influence in the Nile Basin.

What the above suggests is that since 2023 there has been a calamitous descent into catastrophic conflict by Sudan, a descent which studies have shown now transcends domestic power struggles between General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan's Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo's (Hemedti) Rapid Support Forces (RSF). With 14 million internally displaced and famine conditions declared in North Darfur, this conflict has birthed the world's largest humanitarian crisis. The internationalization of the conflict through competing external interests has transformed Sudan into a fragmented geopolitical chessboard where regional powers pursue divergent agendas (Izu, 2025). Egypt and Saudi Arabia emerge as pivotal actors whose interventions critically influence conflict trajectories,

humanitarian outcomes, and prospects for sustainable resolution.

This research examines the conflicting aspirations and strategic motivations as well as divergent operational methods of Saudi Arabia and Egypt vis-à-vis the Sudanese imbroglio. While both nations initially aligned during Sudan's post-Bashir transition, their subsequent backing of opposing factions reflects deeper regional rivalries and security priorities. Egypt's entrenched support for the SAF contrasts with Saudi Arabia's dual-track approach of mediating peace while maintaining ties with both belligerents. Understanding this dynamic is essential for several reasons: First, it illuminates how transnational security dilemmas (e.g., Nile water politics, Red Sea dominance) fuel local conflicts. Second, it reveals limitations of current peace frameworks like the Jeddah Talks that lack enforcement mechanisms against external interference. Third, it provides policymakers with evidence-based insights for conflict mitigation strategies addressing root causes rather than symptoms.

The analysis proceeds through six sections: conceptual foundations of proxy warfare, theoretical framing using realism and regional security complex theory, methodological approach, empirical analysis of Egyptian/Saudi roles, findings on conflict escalation mechanisms, and recommendations for sustainable resolution frameworks.

## 2. Conceptualization and Literature Review

There is no doubt that Sudan today stands on the precipice of collapse. The potential collapse of Sudan as a functioning state would have detrimental repercussions for not only the country and the Sudanese people, but also the wider region and beyond. The push to restore peace, order, and stability in Sudan presupposes an understanding of the ongoing conflict's significance, impact, and implications for domestic, regional, international peace, and security.

At a first glance, civil war to the media and to a large number of scholars and politicians pointed out at ethnicity and tribalism as the root causes for conflict and civil war. For instance despite Arab and African ethnic groups are mixed since the 8<sup>th</sup> century, most literature on the causes of the Sudanese civil war depicts this conflict as an Arab, North region versus an African, and South region. For example, in Darfur conflict, the ethnic division between Arab militias and African tribes has been described as the primary causes of conflict between the farmers and the

shepherds in 2003. Indeed, ethnicity and tribalism have an important role in the conflict but emerge only as secondary factors. Concentration on ethnicity as the primary cause for conflict underestimates the complexity of African societies and politics, and diverts policy maker's attention from the real causes of conflict (Zambakari, 2023)

### 2.1 International Actors

The role of international actors in intrastate conflicts has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly within the context of African conflicts, where regional and external stakeholders often shape the trajectory of political crises. The Sudanese conflict, especially in its post-2019 phases, has seen significant involvement from international actors such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. This literature review explores the academic discourse surrounding external intervention in Sudan, focusing on political, economic, and military dimensions. It also draws on regional theories of international relations and foreign policy behavior to frame the involvement of these two key Middle Eastern states.

According to Ayoob (1995), weak states often become arenas for external manipulation due to their limited sovereignty and institutional fragility. Sudan's prolonged instability, exacerbated by internal political fragmentation, has created an environment ripe for such involvement. Several scholars (e.g., de Waal, 2023; Ylonen, 2022) have emphasized how foreign powers, while presenting themselves as peace brokers, often pursue strategic interests that complicate internal dynamics.

The conceptual review provides clarity on the key terms, ideas, and constructs central to understanding the role of international actors, specifically Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the Sudanese conflict. This section outlines how these concepts have been defined in the existing literature and how they relate to the analytical lens of this study.

The term international actors refers to entities operating beyond national boundaries that affect the domestic or international affairs of a state. These include states, international organizations, and non-state actors. In this study, the focus is on state actors, particularly Saudi Arabia and Egypt, whose involvement in Sudan spans military, economic, and diplomatic spheres. Brown and Smith (2020) argue that international actors in conflict zones often justify their roles as stabilizing forces, though their involvement may serve national interests under the guise of humanitarian or peacekeeping efforts. Saudi Arabia and Egypt are not merely regional powers

with passive interests in Sudan; rather, they are proactive stakeholders whose foreign policy toward Sudan has evolved within broader geopolitical frameworks. A combination of ideological alignments, security concerns, and economic imperatives shapes their actions.

Sudan's geographic position along the Red Sea is of strategic importance to both Riyadh and Cairo. The Red Sea corridor has become increasingly militarized, with both nations aiming to assert naval dominance in the region (Verhoeven, 2019). For Saudi Arabia, Sudan represents both a buffer and a partner in its Red Sea Security Initiative, while for Egypt, control over maritime chokepoints near the Suez Canal reinforces its national security calculus.

Saudi Arabia's involvement in Sudan is multifaceted. In the aftermath of the 2019 ousting of Omar al-Bashir, Riyadh, along with the United Arab Emirates, pledged billions of dollars in aid to Sudan's transitional government. However, scholars such as Marchal (2020) argue that this financial assistance was not purely altruistic. Instead, it was meant to shape the post-Bashir political landscape to reflect the strategic preferences of the Gulf monarchies, particularly by countering the influence of Islamist groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

In addition to economic aid, Saudi Arabia has also recruited thousands of Sudanese fighters, especially from Darfur, to serve in its military coalition in Yemen (Salih, 2021). This militarized cooperation suggests a transactional relationship in which Sudanese instability becomes a reservoir of expendable manpower for regional military ventures.

Egypt's involvement is driven primarily by political and ideological continuity. Historically, Egypt has maintained deep ties with Sudanese military elites, a pattern dating back to the colonial period. El-Gundy (2022) notes that Egypt has consistently supported military actors in Sudan as a means of preserving its influence and ensuring alignment with its own authoritarian governance model.

The fear of a democratic transition in Sudan potentially inspiring similar calls within Egypt is a security concern for the Sisi regime. Consequently, Egypt's support for Sudan's military rulers, including the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), is interpreted by many scholars as a preventive strategy (Abdelaziz, 2023).

## 2.2 Proxy Warfare in Fragile States

The literature is replete with diverse scholarly positions which attempt to frame modern civil conflicts through internationalized warfare strategies where local actors leverage external patrons to gain military advantages, while external powers pursue strategic objectives at reduced costs. Byman (2018) defines proxy relationships as "material support from external powers to non-state actors seeking to influence political outcomes." In Sudan, this manifests as weapons transfers, financial backing, and diplomatic cover provided to SAF and RSF by their respective patrons.

Literature on African conflict systems (De Waal 2015; Englebert & Dunn 2013) emphasizes how fragile institutions and resource competition create vulnerability to external manipulation. Sudan exemplifies this: its strategic location bridging the Sahel, Red Sea, and Horn of Africa, coupled with gold reserves and agricultural potential, attracts interventionist agendas. As Donelli notes: "Gulf monarchies view Sudan as a key country because of its geographical location, a crossroads influencing current and future geostrategic dynamics".

## 2.3 Historical Context of External Involvement

Egypt's involvement stems from deep historical ties with Sudan's military establishment dating to colonial-era integration of armed forces. Post-2011, Egypt's anxieties intensified due to Ethiopian dam construction (GERD) threatening Nile water flows. Academic analyses (Abdelrahman 2024) identify Egypt's "zero-sum mentality" regarding Sudan viewing a pliant Khartoum government as essential for water security.

Saudi Arabia's engagement reflects economic ambitions and religious leadership claims. Unlike Egypt's bilateral focus, Saudi involvement operates through multilateral financial mechanisms and coalition-building. Post-Arab Spring investments exceeding \$3 billion established economic footholds, while participation in Yemen's war forged personal bonds with SAF/RSF commanders. Recent scholarship (Kabandula & Donelli 2024) notes Saudi Arabia's "status-seeking" behavior, using Sudan to project Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's regional leadership credentials.

**Table 1: Evolution of Egyptian and Saudi Roles in Sudan**

Period	Egypt's Role	Saudi Arabia's Role
Al-Bashir Era (1989-2019)	Tense relations over Islamist ties; limited cooperation	Financial patronage via aid; isolation of Iran-aligned factions
Transition (2019-2021)	Support for military-civilian power-sharing; anti-Muslim Brotherhood alignment	\$3 billion aid package; mediation alongside UAE
Post-2021 Coup	Unconditional SAF backing; rejection of civilian transition	Balanced ties with SAF/RSF; Jeddah peace talks
War (2023-present)	Military aid (drones, pilots); intelligence sharing	Dual track: mediation + SAF preference; humanitarian corridors

**Source: Authors' Compilation**

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This research employs complementary theoretical lenses to decode intervention motivations and impacts:

#### 3.1 Neorealism and National Interest

From a realist perspective (Waltz 1979), Egypt and Saudi Arabia act as rational egoists maximizing security amid an anarchic regional system. Egypt's interventions reflect defensive realism countering existential threats like Ethiopian dam construction through Sudanese alliances. Evidence includes Cairo's provision of Turkish drones and alleged air force personnel to SAF, preserving a friendly regime. Saudi Arabia exemplifies offensive realism, seeking regional hegemony by filling power vacuums. Riyadh leverages Sudan's instability to enhance influence via Vision 2030's Red Sea security pillar and economic extraction.

#### 3.2 Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Buzan & Wæver's RSCT frames the Horn of Africa as an interconnected security system where threats

rapidly transnationalize. Sudan constitutes the geographic core linking sub-complexes:

- Nile Basin subsystem: Egyptian Ethiopian rivalry over water resources
- Red Sea subsystem: Saudi-UAE competition over ports and trade routes
- Sahelian subsystem: Libyan/Chadian instability fueling cross-border violence

Egypt and Saudi Arabia emerge as penetrating powers whose actions "securitize" Sudanese domestic politics. Egyptian rhetoric framing RSF victories as "terrorist takeovers" exemplifies securitization, justifying military intervention. Meanwhile, Saudi-UAE competition manifests through proxy support fragmentation, turning Sudan into an arena for Gulf power struggles.

### 3.3 Economic Statecraft Theory

Modern interventions blend security and economic objectives. Saudi Arabia employs chequebook diplomacy offering reconstruction aid as leverage during Jeddah talks while securing agricultural concessions like Al-Hawad project (500,000 acres). Egypt combines military aid with infrastructure investments in roads linking Port Sudan to Egypt, enhancing trade connectivity. This reflects Kirshner's (1997) conception of economic statecraft as a "purposive action to shape the external environment."

### 4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach with embedded process tracing to analyze causal mechanisms linking intervention to conflict outcomes. Data collection includes:

#### 4.1 Data Sources

- Primary: UN reports, official statements, satellite imagery (e.g., UAE field hospitals in Chad)
- Secondary: Academic analyses, NGO documentation (Amnesty International, Crisis Group)
- Tertiary: Media reports verified across multiple outlets (e.g., CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera)

4.2 Analytical Methods

- 1. Comparative Historical Analysis: Examining shifts in Egyptian/Saudi policies across four phases (pre-2019, transition, coup, war)
- 2. Process Tracing: Mapping weapons transfer chains from Egypt to SAF and UAE/Chad routes to RSF
- 3. Stakeholder Impact Assessment: Evaluating humanitarian consequences using IPC famine data and displacement statistics

4.3 Limitations

- i. Secrecy surrounding arms transfers necessitates inference from circumstantial evidence
- ii. Dynamic conflict landscape requires continual reassessment beyond 2025 data
- iii. Arabic-language sources introduce potential translation biases

Ethical adherence ensures avoidance of perpetrator/victim identification in mass atrocity reporting.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Egypt's Intervention: The Nile Imperative

Egypt's Sudan policy orbits around a singular hydrological security paradigm. With 97% of freshwater originating externally, Sudan's cooperation is existential. President Sisi explicitly stated: "The Nile is a matter of life or death for Egypt." This drives three strategic objectives:

- a. Regime Alignment Engineering

Cairo cultivated al-Burhan as a reliable partner post-Bashir, fearing democratic transitions might empower Nile-sharing revisionists. Egypt hosted SAF officers for training, provided aircraft maintenance, and allegedly deployed Egyptian pilots during critical battles. Leaked intelligence confirms Egyptian drones destroyed RSF supply convoys from Chad in 2024.

- b. Anti-Islamist Containment

Egypt perceives Sudan's Islamists as ideological threats, given Muslim Brotherhood links. Despite historical tensions, Cairo coordinated with SAF-

aligned Islamist factions like Al-Baraa Ibn Malik brigade against RSF. Paradoxically, this aligned Egypt with groups it formerly designated terrorists to prevent UAE-backed secular forces (RSF) from dominating.

- c. Institutional Capture

Egypt undermined transitional institutions by supporting the 2021 coup against Prime Minister Hamdok. As the Arab Reform Network documents: "Egypt encouraged the coup against Hamdok's government, which ended the transitional period and paved the way for the current clashes". Post-coup, Egypt lobbied against civilian oversight mechanisms seeking SAF demilitarization.

Table 2: Documented Egyptian Support to SAF

Support Type	Evidence	Conflict Impact
Military Equipment	Turkish Bayraktar drones via Egypt; Iranian Mohajer-6 drones	SAF air superiority in Khartoum (2024-25)
Personnel	27 Egyptian soldiers captured at Merowe Air Base (April 2023); pilot deployments alleged	Enhanced technical capacity for SAF
Diplomatic Cover	Blocking AU sanctions; hosting SAF-aligned factions	Legitimization of SAF governance claims
Economic Leverage	Control over Sudanese agricultural exports; port access	Resource deprivation in RSF zones

Source: Authors' Compilation

5.2 Saudi Arabia: The Delicate Balancer

Saudi Arabia pursues contradictory roles as peace mediator and covert partisan, reflecting competing priorities:

- a. Jeddah Peace Process Theater



Riyadh positioned itself as neutral mediator through the Jeddah Talks (2023-present), co-sponsored with the US. However, negotiations excluded UAE – SAF's key adversary ensuring deadlock. The Wilson Center notes: "Unless Abu Dhabi and Riyadh agree on how to end this conflict, many see it as prolonging war". Saudi Arabia strategically manipulated talks to weaken RSF legitimacy while appearing impartial.

#### b. Economic Capture Strategy

Vision 2030's food security pillar drives Saudi agricultural investments in Sudan's Gezira scheme. Post-2019, Riyadh acquired 500,000 acres for wheat production. Protecting these assets requires stability but not necessarily democracy – explaining Saudi support for the 2021 coup that ousted Hamdok's government.

#### c. Covert Military Tilt

Despite mediation posturing, evidence suggests Saudi preferences for SAF:

- i. Intelligence sharing on RSF movements from Yemeni border sensors
- ii. Medical evacuation for SAF officers to Jeddah hospitals
- iii. Fuel subsidies ensuring SAF mobility during sieges

Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia maintains backchannels to Hemedti, reflecting pragmatic hedging should RSF prevail.

### 5.3 Comparative Impact Analysis

#### 1. Conflict Protraction Mechanisms

- a) Weaponization Dividends: Egyptian/Saudi arms lengthened SAF's operational capacity, convincing al-Burhan of military victory possibility. This hardened negotiation positions as noted: "Both parties see victory as entirely dependent on the defeat of the other".
- b) Diplomatic Fragmentation: Competing initiatives (Egypt's parallel processes vs. Jeddah Talks) created negotiation chaos, enabling warring parties to forum-shop for better terms.
- c) Humanitarian Access Blockage: Saudi Arabia's "humanitarian corridors" focused on Port Sudan (SAF territory), exacerbating famine in RSF-held Darfur.

#### 2. Proxy Network Effects

Egyptian Emirati rivalry transformed Sudan into a multi-layered proxy battleground:

- i. Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar (UAE-backed) funnels weapons to RSF via Chad
- ii. Eritrea (Saudi-aligned) trains SAF infantry near Kassala

This internationalizes conflict resolution, requiring simultaneous de-escalation across multiple regions.

#### 3. Humanitarian Catastrophe

External interventions worsened what the UN terms "the most catastrophic humanitarian crisis of the 21st century":

- i. Famine: 522,000 child deaths from malnutrition; IPC-confirmed famine in North Darfur
- ii. Displacement: 8.8 million internally displaced; 3.5 million refugees overwhelming Chad/Ethiopia
- iii. Atrocities: RSF's genocide against Masalit people enabled by UAE weapons, per ICJ case

### 6. Major Findings and Conclusion

#### 6.1 Key Findings

- i. Zero-Sum Hydropolitics Drive Egypt: Cairo's unconditional SAF backing stems from existential Nile dependencies, overriding democratic principles. This produced short-term tactical gains but long-term instability, including RSF's alignment with Ethiopia.
- ii. Saudi Dual-Track Failure: Riyadh's simultaneous mediation and partisanship undermined ceasefire credibility. Jeddah Talks collapsed because Saudi Arabia couldn't restrain UAE's RSF support while arming SAF.
- iii. Humanitarian Costs of Proxy Logic: External arms transfer directly enabled mass atrocities. The UAE's weapon shipments via Chad facilitated RSF's ethnic cleansing in Darfur, while Egyptian drones intensified urban destruction in Khartoum.
- iv. Regional Destabilization: Conflict spillover is manifesting through:

- a) Chadian refugee crises straining governance
- b) South Sudanese oil export sabotage (90% revenue loss)
- c) Libyan warlord exploitation of border chaos
- v. Institutional Erosion: African Union exclusion by Egypt/Saudi Arabia crippled conflict resolution. The AU's absence represented a "conspicuous" failure despite its "African solutions" mandate.

## 6.2 Conclusions

This research demonstrates that Egyptian and Saudi interventions while pursuing rational security interests fundamentally transformed Sudan's civil war into a trans-regional proxy conflict. Key lessons emerge:

- a) National interest frameworks inadequately address transnationalized conflicts; effective resolution requires multipolar stakeholder engagement including excluded actors like the UAE and Ethiopia.
- b) Economic incentives (debt relief, investment guarantees) may realign external actor behavior more effectively than diplomatic condemnation alone.
- c) African Union revitalization is imperative. The AU should deploy Chapter VII-mandated forces to protect civilians and

enforce arms embargoes under UNSC authorization.

## 6.3 Recommendations

### i. For Regional Actors:

- a) Egypt should decouple Nile security from regime politics, accepting technocratic transitional governance
- b) Saudi Arabia must choose between mediation or partisanship; continuing both perpetuates violence

### ii. For International Community:

- a) UNSC Resolution imposing naval interdiction on arms shipments via Red Sea/Chad
- b) ICC investigation expansion targeting external enablers of atrocities

### iii. For Sudan:

- a) Inclusive constitutional convention guaranteeing Nile water cooperation to reassure Egypt
- b) Security sector reform integrating RSF elements with robust civilian oversight

As Sudan stands at the precipice of total state failure, the path forward demands neutralizing destructive external interference while harnessing constructive regional diplomacy. The alternative a fragmented Sudan governed by warlord fiefdoms guarantees perpetual suffering and regional instability.

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