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## Two Years On, Sudan's War is Spreading

*After the Sudanese army recaptured Khartoum, many hoped that Sudan's war would start winding down. Instead, as it enters its third year, the conflict is escalating and likely to expand in scope, unless diplomats make a concerted push for peace talks.*

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Two years into Sudan's civil war, the country and the surrounding region face a moment of reckoning. The biggest turning point in the conflict to date came in March, when the Sudanese army recaptured Khartoum from its adversary, the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The RSF had held the upper hand in the capital since the war's onset, forcing the army to decamp to Port Sudan in the far east and pushing the state to the brink of collapse. But instead of using this advance to pursue peace, the army appears to want to press on for total victory, while the RSF aims to expand the war to new areas. Both sides are still receiving ample outside support to continue fighting. Further escalation could lead the country to fragment. It also risks destabilising Sudan's neighbours, especially Chad and South Sudan. Those with the most leverage over the army, namely Saudi Arabia and Egypt, should persuade it to give peace negotiations a try. Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates – the RSF's main outside patron – should pursue a détente with the army that de-escalates the war and gives such talks a chance to succeed.

### The Army Gets the Upper Hand

Sudan's war broke out after Omar al-Bashir was overthrown following three decades of dictatorial rule. To coup-proof his regime, Bashir had cultivated the RSF, promoting a militia recruited from among the Arabs of Sudan's western region of Darfur to a paramilitary force rivalling the military

establishment. When **popular protests** brought the Bashir regime to its knees in early 2019, the army and the RSF seized joint control of the state, forming a junta. After agreeing to cede power to a civilian government, they reneged, **retaking the reins** in 2021 before turning on each other two years later amid mounting pressure to restore civilian rule. Fighting began in Khartoum on 15 April 2023, turning the capital into a battlefield.

The RSF seemed to have the advantage for most of the war. It besieged pockets of army control in the Khartoum area. It then conquered most of Darfur, with the major exception of **North Darfur**, as well as much of the Kordofan region in Sudan's south. In late 2023, the RSF launched a surprise offensive south east of Khartoum, taking more of the riverine heartland. But RSF gains peaked in mid-2024, with the army embarking on a multi-front counter-offensive in September.

In early 2025, the Sudanese army and its allies began **making strides** in greater Khartoum, culminating in a series of devastating defeats for the RSF. At the end of March, in a major victory, the army recaptured the presidential palace, the symbolic locus of national sovereignty. Beleaguered RSF fighters fled west across the Jebel Aulia bridge, the last Nile River crossing they still held, despite a plea from their leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, commonly known as Hemedti, to make a stand in the capital. Some of the fighters retreated to RSF positions in Omdurman, Khartoum's sister city west of the Nile, but others went farther west back to Kordofan and Darfur.

## What Lies Ahead

The army's triumph in Khartoum opens a new chapter in the war. The heart of the Sudanese state and the country's only megalopolis, the capital was the prize in the conflict. By recapturing the city, the army and its supporters believe they have saved the state from ruin. For many Sudanese in the riverine centre, regaining Khartoum is akin to winning the war, given that they are accustomed to long-running insurgencies in Sudan's western and southern peripheries. The RSF, in addition to suffering a series of military defeats, has lost its most significant point of leverage in any peace talks, which would have been to satisfy the army's longstanding demand that it pull out of Khartoum's residential areas.

If this war merely concerned the Sudanese, its course would be easier to predict. The army would likely continue to press west, pushing the RSF back toward its base in Darfur, while arming aligned forces in Darfur and Kordofan to tie down the RSF in local conflict. In other words, the war could be expected to slowly fizzle, with low-level insurgency in parts of Sudan's west and south.

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The **heavy outside** involvement in the war, however, makes escalation more likely. Both sides continue to receive substantial outside supplies, including new drones and counter-drone

technologies. Furthermore, Arab and African capitals are competing to project power via Sudan, which sits on the strategic Red Sea, and they view the war's outcome as representing high stakes. A coalition of primarily Arab powers, led by Egypt, offers the most support to the army, while the UAE is the RSF's main backer.

There are substantial risks to escalation. More war endangers Sudan's cohesion as a state, in addition to the destruction and hardship it will cause. The world's largest humanitarian crisis, with half the country's pre-war population facing acute food insecurity, will surely worsen. The RSF's next move appears to be to try broadening its wartime coalition, especially by adding the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-North), a long-time rebel group based along the Sudan-South Sudan border that has historical links to South Sudan's ruling party. This partnership was cemented at a surprise conference in Nairobi in February, leading the RSF and SPLM-North to launch new joint offensives in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states along the South Sudanese and Ethiopian borders. The RSF also appears determined to take the war to Sudan's north, which has mostly been spared to date and is a major power base of the army. In early April, the RSF said its forces had launched a new offensive aimed at the north. This move could deepen the inter-communal tensions that are already tearing at Sudan's social fabric.

On the other side, to retake territory, the Sudanese army has been forced to arm a variety of militias to fight the RSF. The empowerment of these militias poses a threat to Sudan's stability; they could render the country's east increasingly ungovernable if they continue to proliferate under the army's patronage.

Secondly, the escalation is deepening regional polarisation, threatening the stability of neighbouring Chad and South Sudan above all. Tensions between the Sudanese army and both N'Djamena and Juba have been rising in recent weeks. Chad's alleged willingness to serve as a major conduit for arms to the RSF risks renewed proxy war with the Sudanese army. (A cross-border conflict involving proxies destabilised both Sudan and Chad two decades ago, before a 2010 rapprochement.) South Sudan, meanwhile, looks to be heading toward a renewed civil war of its own, which will likely overlap with Sudan's along parts of the border, which also have a long history of proxy warfare. The risk of merger with other conflicts, such as the one that may be brewing between [Ethiopia and Eritrea](#), is also real.

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The prospects for peace talks are poor absent concerted regional action to wind down Sudan's war before it widens. Publicly, army head Abdel Fattah al-Burhan rejects peace talks, saying the war will continue until the RSF disarms and surrenders. Any push for dialogue will likely face resistance from within Burhan's wartime coalition, including from hardline generals, the Islamist movement tied to the former Bashir regime and groups that rebelled against Bashir in Darfur (prompting him

to rally the militias that later became the RSF). Meanwhile, the RSF is licking its wounds and appears in no mood to negotiate, either, hoping that outside backing, lightning strikes on new areas in Sudan and its alliance with the SPLM-North may turn the tide back in its favour.

Even worse, there are signs that Sudan's war may become too fragmented for any straightforward resolution. Negotiations could be further complicated should Burhan and the RSF form competing governments, as both have promised to do. Henceforth, some RSF officials say, they will negotiate only through the new alliance with the SPLM-North and others. Talks between the wartime coalitions – Burhan's, on one hand, and the RSF's forged in Nairobi, on the other – could grow so unwieldy that they would stall, leaving the country confronting de facto partition. Such a division would risk destabilising Sudan's neighbourhood for years to come.

## **Toward De-escalation**

Rather than let the region unravel, diplomats should work for de-escalation, with representatives of states that back the belligerents leading the way. First, the countries with the most leverage over Burhan, namely Saudi Arabia and Egypt, should press the general to use the army's victory in Khartoum to pivot toward peace. Saudi Arabia, in particular, could offer funds for reconstruction of Khartoum and other devastated areas, conditional on a negotiated ceasefire. Possible venues for such talks include Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (where two rounds of talks occurred in 2023), and Manama, Bahrain, where Egypt and the UAE organised quiet discussions including Saudi Arabia and the United States in early 2024.

Secondly, the UAE and the Sudanese army should seek a détente that can de-escalate the war and create an opening for peace. Though there have been numerous back channels between the army and Abu Dhabi, none has panned out, with both sides alleging bad faith. Some sort of rapprochement may be a precondition of a final peace deal, given the UAE's influence over the RSF and the army's objections to Emirati participation in previous mediation efforts.

Further avenues of regional de-escalation would also help. Egypt and the RSF should consider dialogue, to reduce ill-will and assure Cairo that a peace deal would not pave the way for a vengeful RSF to counter its interests. (Riyadh and the RSF have relations predating Sudan's civil war, with thousands of RSF fighters deployed by Saudi Arabia along its southern border with Yemen.) Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE should also agree on parameters for bringing the war to an end, including establishment of a single national government that could reunite the country and would be acceptable to all three states. In addition, both N'Djamena and Juba should try to strike a better balance in their relations with the warring parties in Sudan to prevent spiralling frictions with the army.

Thirdly, Egypt and the African Union should coordinate more closely as they press forward with their respective dialogue tracks among Sudan's civilian political groups. Mediators need to be able to propose the creation of a unity civilian government that is acceptable to a broad swathe of Sudanese and present it as a realistic outcome following a negotiated ceasefire. These talks with civilian groups are key to preserving the hope that a united Sudan can emerge after the war.

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Finally, the West still has a role to play. Though the Trump administration has yet to show interest in Sudan, there are plenty of reasons for it to do so. Washington's close ties with Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Cairo (in addition to other involved capitals, including Ankara, Doha, Addis Ababa and Nairobi) mean that the U.S. remains indispensable to a negotiated peace in Sudan (at least in the view of some). President Donald Trump has declared an ambition to be a peacemaker, and the war in Sudan – now the world's bloodiest – offers an opportunity to use U.S. leverage to silence the guns.

European diplomacy is also important. The UK should stimulate discussion of means of ending the war, including with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and the U.S., at its conference on the war's second anniversary. To be held in London on 15 April, this event is designed as a follow-up to the humanitarian aid pledging conference for Sudan that took place in Paris on the same date in 2024. The UK should closely coordinate its Sudan efforts with others in Europe, including the European Union, Norway and Switzerland, especially given the uncertainty surrounding the Trump administration's stance.

If the war keeps escalating, the result will likely be fragmentation in Sudan and destabilisation of the neighbourhood, as fighting spills across the border into South Sudan and maybe other countries as well. Outside powers can proceed on their present course, egging on the army and RSF, which will push Sudan toward the edge of utter destruction. Alternatively, they can stop fuelling the conflict and start working in concert to bring it to a speedy close. The consequences of their choice will not be confined to Sudan.

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