

Sudan: Geopolitical context

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Introduction

The root causes of Sudan's conflict are at heart domestic, with various actors – chiefly the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), as well as a wide array of other armed actors – fighting each other to dominate the country's politics and economy. At the same time, however, **international actors play a key role in enabling the fighting to continue** by providing military, economic, and political support to the warring parties. The situation is further worsened by the absence of a meaningful, concerted action by the international community to stop the fighting or to protect civilians. This document offers an overview of the main foreign actors involved in Sudan's ongoing war, and suggests a few entry points for action by the Netherlands and the European Union (EU).

Overview of the engagement of foreign actors

The two main warring parties in Sudan benefit from the support of various foreign countries. The most relevant backers of the SAF include: **Egypt** (SAF's main ally, more details below); Eritrea (which hosts training camps for SAF-aligned armed groups); **Turkey** (which sells military equipment to SAF and hosts various members of the Sudanese Islamist Movement, a key SAF ally); and **Iran** (whose drones have greatly aided SAF's recent offensive). On the other hand, the RSF's most prominent supporters include: the **United Arab Emirates** (UAE, the RSF's main ally, more details below); **Kenya** (which has hosted high-level meetings of RSF-affiliated political forces); **Chad** (which has been the main facilitator for the delivery of military equipment from the UAE to the RSF via its territory, though other countries have also played such a role, including Uganda and South Sudan); and the **Libyan National Army** (LNA, based in eastern Libya, which has strong commercial ties with the RSF, including on the supply of fuel). Other countries have adopted a more ambiguous position. These include **Saudi Arabia** (whose position has gradually shifted from relatively neutrality towards the SAF, more details below), **South Sudan** (whose government recently seems to be edging closer to the RSF, after earlier attempts to strike a balance in its relations with the two warring parties), and **Russia** (which has cultivated ties with both warring parties, more details below).

The most relevant foreign actors, their interests and their approaches to Sudan

Egypt is the SAF's main backer. Cairo's armed forces are historically very close to their Sudanese counterparts, and supported the SAF already well before the current war. Since April 2023, this

support has materialized in different forms, including direct military cooperation, diplomatic support, extensive trade networks, and the hosting of SAF-friendly political factions in Cairo. Given its long shared border, Egypt has a keen interest in stability in Sudan – though its economy has also partly benefited from the conflict, which has driven larger flows of some lucrative commodities (e.g. gold, gum Arabic) to Egypt. Cairo's core interests also include securing Sudan's cooperation in its dispute with Ethiopia over the Nile.

The **UAE** is the RSF's main supporter, but it also retains strong leverage over the SAF. The UAE has a significant economic engagement in Sudan, and has relations with both warring parties, dating to the deployment of both SAF and RSF soldiers in support of the Saudi-Emirati coalition's war in Yemen. Since April 2023, the UAE has increasingly leaned towards the RSF, providing it with support militarily (e.g. arms shipments), economically (e.g. hosting RSF-affiliated companies), and politically (e.g. facilitating the RSF's diplomatic outreach). Still, the UAE is also a key hub for facilitating the business dealings of the SAF and its affiliates, and thus retains a significant leverage over them. If Abu Dhabi decided to move away from its current approach and play a more constructive role in Sudan, the impact could be significant.

Russia is an actor of particular relevance for the Netherlands and the EU in terms of geopolitical competition. Over the past years, Moscow has cultivated ties with both the SAF and the RSF, including a prospective deal (largely negotiated with SAF) for a naval military facility on Sudan's Red Sea coast (signed in 2017, but so far not yet realized), as well as lucrative business dealings in the gold sector (with both SAF- and RSF-affiliated entities). Both developments have negative implications for the EU, as the gold trade helps Russia to mitigate the impact of EU sanctions, and a naval base in the Red Sea would help Moscow to project power in an area that is critical for European trade and security.

Saudi Arabia has emerged since the beginning of the war as the most credible potential mediator between the two warring parties. Much like the UAE, Saudi Arabia has a significant economic presence in Sudan, and ties with both the SAF and the RSF dating back to the war in Yemen. Unlike Abu Dhabi, however, Riyadh suffers directly the consequences of instability in Sudan (owing to geographical proximity), and has a stronger interest in keeping the broader region relatively stable. This position has led Saudi Arabia to act as a mediator, bringing the warring parties into direct talks (in collaboration with the United States) – though the talks were ultimately unsuccessful. Recently, Riyadh seems to have been leaning closer to the SAF, as shown by its explicit rejection of the RSF-led Nairobi Declaration in February 2025.

Entry points for action by the Netherlands and the EU

Although the Netherlands – and the EU more at large – have limited direct leverage over the warring parties in Sudan, there are different ways in which they can **indirectly influence the course of the war**. For instance, they have strong ties with both the UAE and Egypt, which can be used to nudge both parties towards playing a more constructive role (**this could have a significant impact**,

particularly in the case of the UAE, see above).¹ Even if the push towards a peace agreement proves unsuccessful (as it clearly has so far), the aim should be at least for these countries to use their leverage to improve protection of civilian efforts, upping the pressure on the warring parties to respect international humanitarian law. European countries should also ensure **stricter controls on their arms sales** to countries that may re-sell these weapons to Sudan (e.g. the UAE),² in violation of existing embargos.

From a diplomatic standpoint, the EU has so far leaned heavily on the **African Union (AU)** to facilitate diplomatic processes, with a focus on the inclusion of civilian actors in the negotiations. The AU has all the institutional structures in place to facilitate such a dialogue, but the effectiveness of its approach has so far been hampered by the counterproductive engagement of some of its member states in the region in support of different warring parties (see examples above). The EU could thus complement its focus on supporting the AU with a **bilateral engagement with key countries in the region** (e.g. Kenya, which is a key counterpart in the region for both the EU and the Netherlands).³

Finally, the Netherlands and the EU are (more or less) indirectly linked to the war through the **value chains of some key commodities** that are exported from Sudan into international markets, and that are often used by the warring parties to fund the conflict. These include **gold**,⁴ as well as (to a lesser extent) **gum Arabic**.⁵ Stronger regulations and their enforcement on these value chains could help to mitigate the ability of the warring parties to fund the war through their engagement with international (including European) market actors.

For any follow-up query, please reach out to Guido Lanfranchi (glanfranchi@clingendael.org).

¹ <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/stop-war-sudan-bankrupt-warlords>

² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/11/sudan-french-manufactured-weapons-system-identified-in-conflict-new-investigation/>

³ <https://www.netherlandsandyou.nl/documents/3651352/4374330/MACS%2BKenya%2B2023-2026%2BPublic%2BVersion.pdf/ed5b417a-24b9-8cd1-9f3e-7acec1fdf530?version=1.0&t=1691666509460>

⁴ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/gold-and-war-sudan>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/how-key-ingredient-coca-cola-mms-is-smuggled-war-torn-sudan-2025-03-04/>