

# ISSUE BRIEF

## The War in Sudan: The Role of External Actors and the Prospects for U.S.-Led Conflict Resolution

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Cover Image: Associated Press

## MAP OF SUDAN



## INTRODUCTION

The Sudanese civil war stands out even among the most devastating and complex conflicts in the world today, exacting a catastrophic toll on civilians and unleashing extreme violence that has spilled across borders and destabilized an entire region. What began as a power struggle between domestic actors has evolved into a multifaceted war marked by mass displacement, acute food insecurity, and widespread human rights abuses. These humanitarian crises are compounded by the involvement of external actors, whose competing interests have further fueled the conflict and complicated the prospects for resolution.

The Trump administration has signaled a renewed interest in helping to bring Sudan's war to an end, reflecting concerns over the scale of the humanitarian crisis, spiraling

regional instability, and the conflict's broader geopolitical implications. Yet, at least to date, this reengagement has been marked more by rhetoric than by a clearly articulated strategy. There is concern that, amid overlapping regional crises, including in Libya, Somalia, and Yemen, the conflict in Sudan may continue to be absorbed into a wider arc of instability shaped by the competing interests of regional and external powers, rather than addressed as a distinct crisis in its own right, and afforded the policy bandwidth and diplomatic resources necessary to help end the war.

When it remains focused, the Trump administration has demonstrated a willingness to help mediate long-running conflicts, including between Israel and Hamas, Russia and Ukraine, Armenia and

Azerbaijan, Cambodia and Thailand, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and India and Pakistan. Yet given all of its ongoing commitments, does Washington have the bandwidth and staying power to help push forward negotiations in Sudan?

This Issue Brief sets out to answer two interrelated questions:

- To what extent have external actors impacted the longevity of the conflict in Sudan?
- For U.S. policymakers, what are the potential best courses of action to help the conflict come to an end?

The hands-on role of external actors in perpetuating this conflict is likely to keep it dragging on indefinitely. The direct involvement of external actors has become a critical driver of the war's persistence and escalation. Research on insurgencies and civil wars demonstrates that conflicts involving multiple external patrons tend to be longer, more lethal, and significantly harder to resolve, as outside support reduces incentives for compromise and prolongs battlefield stalemates. In other words, insurgencies with multiple external actors are longer, bloodier, and more challenging to resolve.<sup>1</sup> Sudan increasingly reflects this pattern. The conflict has evolved into a complex, externally sustained confrontation in which non-state armed groups are insulated from collapse and accountability by foreign backing.

As African Affairs expert Cameron Hudson has noted, "External actors continue to

be the sine qua non of Sudan's war and have been since the start of the war. They have helped both sides acquire the latest generation of advanced weapons, increasing the scope and lethality of the conflict. They have provided the political and diplomatic cover for both sides to press their case globally and avoid international efforts to curtail the fighting. And they have stepped in with needed financing that has allowed both sides to sustain their troops and recruit new ones. This war would likely already be over were it not for the regional competition that continues to fuel it."<sup>2</sup>

This paper examines the role of external actors—most notably, though not exclusively, the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—in detail, outlines the mechanisms through which it is sustaining violent non-state armed groups across Sudan, and assesses potential pathways to shift the conflict away from continued fighting and toward a negotiated political outcome. The UAE is highlighted in this analysis not as a political judgment, but because of the scale, consistency, and operational impact of its support to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). This support has reportedly included providing material assistance, facilitating the deployment of mercenary fighters, and relying on regional smuggling and logistics networks that have enabled the RSF to sustain large-scale military operations despite international pressure. These networks have also coincided with well-documented patterns of atrocities and war crimes committed by the RSF against civilian populations, making external support not merely a background factor, but a central enabler of extreme violence.

**Ending the war will therefore require more**

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Connable and Martin Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2010, p.xvi.

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<sup>2</sup> Quote provided via email correspondence with The Soufan Center, Jan 6, 2026.

than localized ceasefires or humanitarian appeals. Only sustained U.S. leadership combining assertive diplomacy, coordinated international pressure, and the strategic use of economic and political leverage can meaningfully constrain external enablers and compel key actors to recalibrate their positions. This paper assesses the role of external actors and details the methods they are using to prop up violent non-state armed groups operating on the ground throughout Sudan. It then moves to an analysis of existing avenues to help move away from fighting and toward negotiations.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND STRUCTURAL ROOTS OF THE CONFLICT

The origins of the civil war in Sudan cannot be understood without examining the long-standing fragmentation of the Sudanese state, the militarization of its peripheral regions, and the rise of non-state armed groups and networks that transcend national borders. The conflict, which first erupted in April 2023, has evolved into one of the most destructive and destabilizing wars of the last decade, with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a non-state armed paramilitary organization led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as “Hemedti”) that traces its roots back to the Janjaweed militias of the early 2000s, emerging as the most violent actor on the ground.<sup>3</sup> The Janjaweed militias were first mobilized by the regime of longtime Sudanese strongman Omar al-Bashir during the Darfur conflict in the early 2000s.<sup>4</sup> These

militias were initially armed and empowered as counterinsurgency auxiliaries, operating with widespread autonomy and enjoying near-total impunity for mass atrocities committed against non-Arab communities.<sup>5</sup>

In 2013, when Bashir created the RSF by reorganizing the Janjaweed militias into a formal state-controlled paramilitary, its core leadership group, led by Hemedti, was primarily drawn from the Rizeigat and allied Arab tribes straddling the Chad-Sudan border.<sup>6</sup> This helped preserve cross-border networks throughout the region and retain independent channels for finance, recruitment, and weapons acquisition. Although the creation of the RSF would lead to some diversification among its rank-and-file, its core leadership remained rooted in the allied Arab tribes of the border regions. Over time, this foundation enabled the RSF to evolve into a parallel military structure whose loyalties were shaped less by national command authority and more by tribal allegiance, economic opportunity, and external relationships.<sup>7</sup> As this Issue Brief will detail, the RSF received significant external support from the UAE. In contrast, its rival, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF),

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com/2024/06/05/sudan-rsf-darfur-genocide-el-fasher/.

5 Lauren Ploch Blanchard, “The Wear and Humanitarian Crisis in Sudan,” Congressional Research Service (CRS), January 22, 2025, [https://www.congress.gov/crs\\_external\\_products/IF/PDF/IF12816/IF12816.4.pdf](https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF12816/IF12816.4.pdf).

6 Alden Young, “Sahelian Arabs and Their Role in the Sudan War,” *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, Ohio State University & Miami University, March 2024, <https://origins.osu.edu/read/sahelian-arabs-and-their-role-sudan-war>.

7 Alex de Waal, “He Made His Money Selling Camels and Gold. Now This Warlord Controls Half of Sudan,” *BBC News*, November 3, 2025, [www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3vn17r29v9o](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3vn17r29v9o).

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3 Feltman, “Sudan’s Deadly Divide: The RSF and SAF’s Reign of Terror.”

4 Mutazim Ali and Yonah Diamond, “Sudanese Militias Are Committing Genocide in Darfur—Again,” *Foreign Policy*, June 5, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/06/05/sudanese-militias-are-committing-genocide-in-darfur-again/>.

also received external support, including from Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Ambassador J. Peter Pham remarks why external actors are interested in Sudan, stating “Sudan is simply too tempting an arena: strategically located with a west that is in the Sahel and an east on the Red Sea, Egypt and Libya to the north and Ethiopia and the Sub-Saharan Nile Basin states to the south... Altogether too tempting for outside powers, each easily finding its own proxies, to be drawn in.”<sup>8</sup>

## RISE OF THE RAPID SUPPORT FORCES (RSF)

A key component of the RSF’s rise was its early alliance with the Russian private military company (PMC), the Wagner Group, led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, which sought access to Sudanese mineral wealth and to expand Moscow’s influence throughout the region. In late 2017, Wagner operatives surfaced in Sudan at Bashir’s invitation. Shortly after, Wagner established a front company, Meroe Gold, and, over time, grew increasingly involved in Sudan’s gold sector, where the RSF, particularly Hemediti, was already deeply entrenched. RSF paramilitaries provided protection to Russian mercenaries as they moved gold through the country.<sup>9</sup> The two groups then began to establish logistical and training links, with Wagner providing tactical support, equipment maintenance, and advisory services in exchange for access to gold concessions in Darfur and central Sudan. In exchange for their services, which often include draconian counterinsurgency tactics against the enemies of whatever government the mercenaries are working in

8 Quote provided via email correspondence with The Soufan Center, Jan 8, 2026.

9 Philip Obaji Jr., “Sudan: Russia’s Wagner Group and the Grab for Power and Gold,” *DW*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/pmc-russias-wagner-group-in-sudan-gold-military-junta/a-65439746>.

support of, Wagner-linked companies were granted extraction rights in lucrative mining zones, facilitating the emergence of a gold-smuggling pipeline from Sudanese mines to export hubs in the UAE.<sup>10</sup> This trade has and continues to generate a financial windfall, allowing the RSF to stockpile money, purchase weapons on the global arms market, and cultivate a foreign patronage network that further reduces its dependence on the Sudanese state. By the time open conflict began in the spring of 2023, the RSF had already matured into a financially autonomous, internationally connected armed actor with access to foreign currency, control of lucrative smuggling corridors, and relationships with a range of both state and non-state co-conspirators.<sup>11</sup>

The RSF’s close connections to tribal and mercenary networks in neighboring Chad played an equally decisive role in shaping the conflict, especially in its nascent stages. Arab tribes along the Chad–Sudan frontier provided the RSF with supply routes and fighters well before the war kicked off in earnest. These communities, many of whom share a common lineage, economic ties, and political grievances, have historically moved back and forth across the porous border with impunity, facilitating the recruitment of fighters and the largely unfettered movement of weapons and goods.<sup>12</sup> After the conflict escalated, these networks enabled the RSF to mobilize reinforcements and gain quick access to additional manpower. These

10 Global Witness, “Exposing the RSF’s Secret Financial Network,” Global Witness, December 9, 2019, <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/conflict-resources/exposing-rsfs-secret-financial-network/>.

11 Ahmed Soliman and Suliman Baldo, *Gold and the War in Sudan: How Regional Solutions Can Support an End to Conflict* (Chatham House, March 2025).

12 Enrica Picco, *The Fallout in Chad from the Fighting in Darfur* (International Crisis Group, August 10, 2023).

networks also helped to secure rear-area logistics and move material from Am Djarass into Darfur. Chad-based mercenaries and tribal militias, many battle-hardened and experienced from fighting in Libya's civil war, also entered the Sudanese theater.<sup>13</sup> There have also been extensive reports about Colombian mercenaries fighting in Sudan alongside the RSF, where they have been accused of training child soldiers.<sup>14</sup> And while Colombian mercenaries may be the most reported upon contingent, it is far from the only one, with accusations that mercenaries from across the African continent have been routed through Chad, Libya, Kenya, Somalia, and elsewhere, onto the battlefield in Sudan.<sup>15</sup>

An already complex operating environment was further complicated by the destabilizing effects of these networks, which are closely linked to Libya's long-running fragmentation. After the fall of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi, Libya devolved into a hub for arms trafficking, mercenary contracting, and illicit finance.<sup>16</sup> The regional dynamics surrounding Sudan's conflict remain difficult to disaggregate from the relationship that developed between Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar, the Wagner Group, and

the UAE. Wagner operatives established a significant presence in eastern Libya beginning in 2019, securing access to oil and natural resource infrastructure. The Wagner group also entrenched itself in front-line military positions in support of Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), while providing political advisory services and disinformation operations.<sup>17</sup> This partnership was widely suspected to be underwritten by the UAE, whose aircraft and logistical networks were repeatedly documented transporting weapons, equipment, and supplies to Haftar-controlled areas in violation of the UN arms embargo on Libya.<sup>18</sup>

At the center of this network was Prigozhin, who coordinated political, military, and commercial agreements linking Haftar to Moscow. In late 2018, Prigozhin personally arranged and attended a meeting in Moscow at which Haftar met with senior Russian officials.<sup>19</sup> This convergence of Russian private military companies, funding from Abu Dhabi, and Haftar's territorial ambitions formed a partnership that encompassed the RSF through shared smuggling routes, arms pipelines, and mineral extraction interests, thereby shaping the current contours of the conflict. In 2019, RSF units were deployed

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13 Emadeddin Badi, *Collateral Circuits: The Impact of the Sudan's War on Arms Markets and Mercenary Networks in Chad and Libya* (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, December 1, 2025).

14 Harriet Barber, "'War is a Business': The Colombian Mercenaries Training Sudan's Child Fighters to 'Go and Get Killed,'" *The Guardian*, October 8, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/08/colombian-mercenaries-sudan-war>.

15 AFP, "Sudan Paramilitary Forces Say Regret Deadly Chad Border Clash," January 20, 2026, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2629917/middle-east>.

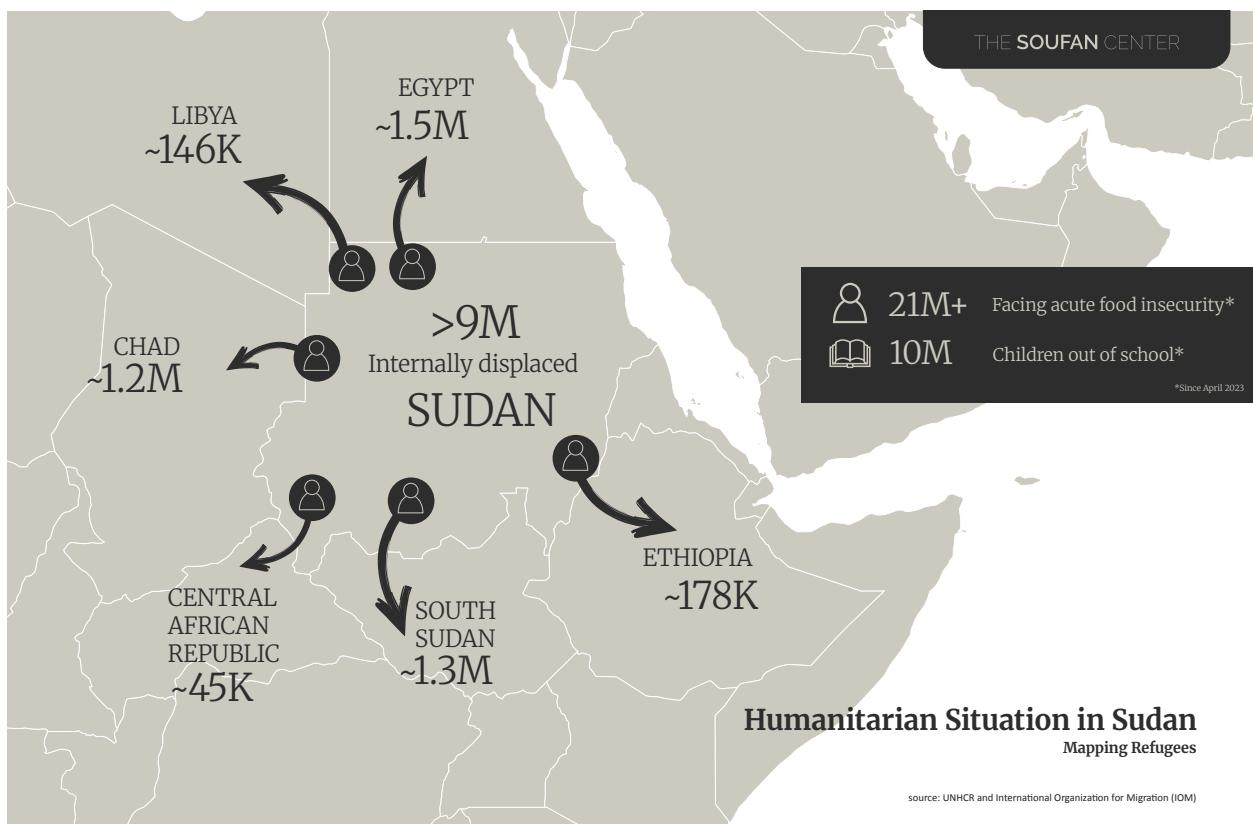
16 Sarah Fares, "Up in Arms: The Middle East as the World's Illicit Arms Depot," *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, March 24, 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/middle-east-illicit-arms-trafficking-ocindex/>.

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17 Emadeddin Badi, "To Counter the Wagner Group's Presence in Africa, the US Will Need to Prioritize Stabilizing Libya," *MENASource*, February 28, 2023, Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/to-counter-the-wagner-groups-presence-in-africa-the-us-will-need-to-prioritize-stabilizing-libya/>.

18 Candace Rondeaux, Oliver Imhof, and Jack Margolin, "The Abu Dhabi Express: Analyzing the Wagner Group's Libya Logistics Pipeline & Operations," *Future Frontlines*, New America, November 1, 2021, <https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/the-abu-dhabi-express/>.

19 Lukas Andriukaitis, "#PutinAtWar: Prigozhin Meets Libyan Military Officials," *DFRLab*, November 24, 2018, <https://dfrlab.org/2018/11/24/putin-at-war-prigozhin-meets-libyan-military-officials/>.



into Libya as auxiliary forces supporting Haftar's LNA, where they gained valuable combat experience, operated alongside foreign intelligence services, and gained access to weapons circulating throughout Libya's vast illicit arms markets.<sup>20</sup> This involvement also strengthened RSF ties with the UAE, Haftar's primary external sponsor, laying the foundation for future logistical and political cooperation in Sudan.<sup>21</sup>

20 Jason Burke and Zeinab Mohammed Salih, "Mercenaries Flock to Libya Raising Fears of a Prolonged War," *The Guardian*, December 24, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/24/mercenaries-flock-to-libya-raising-fears-of-prolonged-war>.

21 Nina Pouls, "Sudanese Militias in Libya," *Online Analysis*, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), January 17, 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2020/01/csdp-sudanese-militias-in-libya/>.

By the time the SAF and the RSF entered direct confrontation in 2023, these historical, economic, and geopolitical dynamics had already solidified the RSF as an actor far more resilient and internationally connected than its formal role inside Sudan might otherwise suggest. The convergence of Wagner-backed mining operations, UAE-facilitated gold smuggling, tribal mobilization across the Chad–Sudan border, and combat experience in Libya—and earlier in Yemen, where Bashir deployed the paramilitaries in 2015—all served as a force multiplier for the RSF. The scale of the RSF's operational successes in the Sudan conflict and the severity of the humanitarian crisis that followed were, in turn, a product of a paramilitary force with independent revenue streams, external weapons suppliers, and a networked

regional support base. These factors helped the RSF transform into a hybrid regional actor capable of prosecuting a sustained war against the Sudanese state and its external patrons.

## THE SCOPE AND SCALE OF THE CONFLICT IN SUDAN

As of early 2026, the RSF controls or contests the bulk of Darfur, including El Fasher, a city whose fall represents both the collapse of the last major government stronghold in western Sudan—vacated by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in October 2025—and the culmination of an 18-month siege that has starved, terrorized, and forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians.<sup>22</sup> Independent reporting from United Nations bodies, humanitarian agencies, and international legal observers suggests that the RSF's actions have led to one of the gravest civilian protection crises in recent years. Across Darfur and other conflict areas, the magnitude of violence inflicted by RSF units exhibits a level of scale, coordination, and brutality that, according to many international law scholars and the UN Human Rights Council Fact-Finding Mission, meets the established legal definitions of mass atrocity crimes.<sup>23</sup>

22 Declan Walsh, "Sudan's Army Chief Flees El-Fasher as Rapid Support Forces Tighten Control," *New York Times*, October 28, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/28/world/africa/sudan-el-fasher-burhan-rsf.html>.

23 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "Sudan: UN Fact-Finding Mission Outlines Extensive Human Rights Violations, International Crimes, Urges Protection of Civilians," September 6, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/09/sudan-un-fact-finding-mission-outlines-extensive-human-rights-violations>.

Investigators have documented widespread acts amounting to crimes against humanity, including systematic killings of civilians, persecution of identifiable ethnic communities, forced displacement, and the deliberate destruction of critical civilian infrastructure.<sup>24</sup> Satellite imagery details mass graves, the true extent of which still remains unknown.<sup>25</sup> These acts have been conducted in parallel with a more comprehensive campaign of ethnic cleansing that has targeted non-Arab populations, most notably the Masalit, and the forcible expulsion of survivors into neighboring Chad, with entire towns and districts vacated.<sup>26</sup>

The RSF's operations have also been defined by the use of sexual violence as an instrument of torture, terror, and domination.<sup>27</sup> Numerous testimonies collected by Amnesty International describe patterns of rape, gang rape, and sexual enslavement used to demoralize communities, punish perceived opposition, and assert control over captured

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24 United Nations Human Rights Council, *Sudan: A War of Atrocities. Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan*, 60th sess., 5 September 2025, UN Doc. A/HRC/60/22.

25 Menna Farouk, "Sudan's El-Fasher Under the RSF, Destroyed and 'Full of Bodies,'" *Al-Monitor*, December 19, 2025, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/12/sudans-el-fasher-under-rsf-destroyed-and-full-bodies>.

26 Mat Nashed, "A Massacre, an Exodus from Darfur, and Years of Rehabilitation for Sudanese Refugees," *Al Jazeera*, June 25, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/6/25/a-massacre-an-exodus-from-darfur-and-years-of-rehab-for-sudanese-refugees>.

27 Amnesty International, "Sudan: Rapid Support Forces' Horrific and Widespread Use of Sexual Violence Leaves Lives in Tatters," April 4, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/04/sudan-rapid-support-forces-horrific-and-widespread-use-of-sexual-violence-leaves-lives-in-tatters/>.

areas.<sup>28</sup> As part of its strategy, the RSF has imposed siege conditions on civilian populations, restricting the flow of food, denying access to water and medicine, and blocking humanitarian assistance. These blockades, combined with targeted attacks on aid convoys and medical facilities, demonstrate the strategic intent behind using starvation as a method of warfare, which is expressly prohibited under international humanitarian law.<sup>29</sup>

The cumulative effect of the RSF's conduct has produced mass displacement on an unprecedented scale, with hundreds of thousands fleeing across the border into Chad and millions more displaced internally.<sup>30</sup> The destruction of homes, villages, markets, and health centers has rendered large portions of Darfur uninhabitable, eliminating the possibility of immediate return for surviving communities. Additionally, the rapid and robust influx of weapons and ammunition infused into this conflict has transformed civilian areas across Darfur into de facto free-fire zones. The scale of displacement is emblematic of the crisis: more than 11 million people have been forced from their homes in Sudan, and yet the conflict has mostly remained out of the headlines, subsumed behind the policy bandwidth dedicated to Ukraine and Gaza.<sup>31</sup>

The humanitarian crisis threatens to overwhelm the operating capacity of neighboring Chad, a fragile state in its own

right, where the conflict has spread, and which now hosts hundreds of thousands of refugees. Conditions for those who remain inside Darfur are dire. Internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, once considered relatively safer sanctuaries, have been repeatedly targeted by RSF-operated drones, mortars, and artillery.<sup>32</sup> The RSF's aforementioned blockades and attacks on markets, medical facilities, and other civilian infrastructure have contributed to the collapse of the basic social and economic structures that buttress and sustain daily life.<sup>33</sup>

While the RSF has been widely identified as the most violent actor in this conflict, the SAF has also been accused of numerous human rights abuses that should not be overlooked. The SAF's abuses have often been overshadowed by the sheer scale of the RSF's brutality; however, the SAF's actions form a critical component in the broader pattern of harm inflicted on Sudanese civilians, which has also wreaked havoc on the country and contributed to regional destabilization. In May 2025, the U.S. government accused the SAF of using chemical weapons during its clashes with RSF units, even sanctioning General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the SAF.<sup>34</sup> Months later, evidence verifying the reports of the SAF's use of chlorine gas against RSF-held areas was published, an act in breach of the Chemical Weapons Convention, and widely accepted as a war crime. Videos showed a distinctive greenish-yellow gas cloud spreading across RSF-held areas. Survivors in the footage can be seen

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28 Amnesty International, “*“They Raped All of Us”: Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in Sudan*,” AFR 54/9201/2025, April 2025.

29 United Nations Human Rights Council, Sudan: A War of Atrocities.

30 International Rescue Committee, “*Crisis in Sudan: What’s Happening and How to Help*,” April 17, 2023, <https://www.rescue.org/article/crisis-sudan-what-happening-and-how-help>.

31 Council on Foreign Relations, “*Power Struggle in Sudan*,” Global Conflict Tracker, last updated November 6, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/power-struggle-sudan>.

32 Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, “*Joint Statement: Genocide Returns to Darfur*,” December 11, 2023, <https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/joint-statement-genocide-returns-to-darfur/>.

33 United Nations Human Rights Council, Sudan: A War of Atrocities.

34 Human Rights Watch, “*Disturbing Reports of Sudan’s Military Using Chlorine Gas*,” October 9, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/10/09/disturbing-reports-of-sudans-military-using-chlorine-gas>.

coughing, struggling to breathe, and receiving oxygen, reporting a strong chemical odor and sudden respiratory distress immediately after aerial bombardment.<sup>35</sup> Despite these videos, the SAF has denied these allegations.

The SAF has also been implicated in the deliberate obstruction of humanitarian relief, particularly where the RSF holds territorial control. According to the UN Human Rights Council's Independent Fact-Finding Mission, the SAF repeatedly blocked or delayed the passage of humanitarian convoys, restricted fuel deliveries needed for hospital generators, and suspended cross-line aid movements intended for civilians trapped behind RSF frontlines.<sup>36</sup> In addition to blocking aid, the SAF has conducted indiscriminate aerial bombardments that have killed and injured civilians far from front-line positions. Conflict monitors have documented multiple SAF airstrikes on civilian areas in 2024-2025, including a strike on a crowded marketplace in the rural town of Kabkabiya, that killed at least 86 civilians.<sup>37</sup> Human rights organizations and independent monitors have also documented SAF involvement in arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and torture of detainees accused of supporting the RSF after the SAF re-entered Khartoum in early 2025.<sup>38</sup>

35 Quentin Peschard and The France 24 Observers, "Videos Show the Sudanese Army's Use of Chlorine Gas as a Weapon," France 24, October 9, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20251009-chemical-weapons-sudan-part-1-investigation-attacks-chlorine-al-jaili-refinery>.

36 United Nations Human Rights Council, Sudan: A War of Atrocities.

37 Sudan War Monitor, "Sudanese Air Force Kills Nearly 200 in Market Strike," November 5, 2024, <https://sudanwarmonitor.com/p/sudanese-air-force-kills-nearly-200>.

38 Sudan Tribune, "Sudan: SAF Accused of Torturing Detainees in Wad Madani," August 18, 2025, <https://sudantribune.com/article/304052>.

Throughout the civil war, acts by the RSF, and at times the SAF, have eroded access to food, clean water, and medical care to the point of systemic deprivation, with the destruction of supply routes placing millions at acute risk of starvation and preventable disease. Entire communities have been depopulated, public health systems have collapsed, and humanitarian agencies face impossible challenges in reaching those most in need. Taken together, these factors prove that the civilian toll of the conflict is not just a second-order effect of the war, but a deliberate outcome attached to the RSF's military strategy, designed to produce suffering, displacement, and demographic transformation.

## ROLE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS

A growing body of evidence points to a clear pattern in how the UAE's arms, ammunition, and equipment were initially routed—moving through eastern Chad into RSF-held territory.<sup>39</sup> Chad served as a key transit hub for these UAE-supplied weapons during the first two years of the conflict. However, the volume of flights from the UAE into Chad declined noticeably in 2025 as operations shifted toward eastern Libya. A series of intelligence leaks exposing the extent of Chadian involvement with the RSF—and the resulting domestic backlash from Zaghawa border communities that had also suffered RSF attacks—prompted N'Djamena to scale back its role in these supply chains in late 2024.<sup>40</sup> Prior to this development, a UN panel

39 Panel of Experts on the Sudan, Letter dated 15 January 2024 from the Panel of Experts on the Sudan addressed to the President of the Security Council, UN Doc. S/2024/65 (15 January 2024).

40 Ruben De Koning, "Contested Corridors: The Illicit Transnational Supply Chains Sustaining Sudan's Conflict," *Global Initiative Against Transnational Or-*

of experts, as well as other international and regional observers, reported that frequent arms and ammunition deliveries arriving by cargo aircraft at Am Djarass airport in Chad, where shipments were transferred by truck convoys into Darfur and handed over to the RSF before being distributed locally or moved onward to Khartoum via smuggling routes. The supplies—overseen by senior RSF commanders familiar with the border region—included a wide range of weapons systems often disguised as humanitarian aid.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, the RSF's capture of the Sudan–Libya–Egypt border triangle in June 2025 secured additional routes through southeastern Libya and northern Sudan, thereby reducing the group's reliance on the already waning Chadian facilitation. Since then, the UAE has increasingly depended on southern and eastern Libya, as well as South Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya, to help facilitate its resupply operations.<sup>42</sup> The RSF had already made extensive use of southern Libya as a logistics base, sourcing fuel, vehicles, and weapons supplies. Fuel was smuggled into North Darfur by Darfurian armed movements based in Libya, which purchased fuel at reduced prices through their relationships with the LNA. Tanker trucks escorted by these groups transported fuel across the border triangle, often via Am Djarass. This process was only made easier through the area's capture in 2025.<sup>43</sup>

The RSF purchased vehicles, particularly

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ganized Crime, posted November 20, 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-illicit-transnational-supply-chains-sustaining-sudans-conflict/>.

41 Panel of Experts on the Sudan, *Letter dated 15 January 2024*, UN Doc. S/2024/65.

42 De Koning, "Contested Corridors: The Illicit Transnational Supply Chains."

43 Panel of Experts on the Sudan, *Letter dated 15 January 2024*, UN Doc. S/2024/65.

Land Cruisers, from Libya, importing dozens and transporting them through Sabha and Kufra into Darfur, including by splinter groups returning to Sudan in 2023. The RSF also sought to move artillery and ammunition obtained in Libya into Darfur with the help of Darfurian armed movements. LNA-aligned brigades in southern Libya supported these operations. However, after Chad's withdrawal from RSF supply chains and RSF's territorial acquisitions, these operations have expanded further into eastern Libya. In the five months between June and November 2025, researchers recorded over 200 cargo flights arriving at airports in the region, suspected of supporting resupply operations for the RSF.<sup>44</sup>

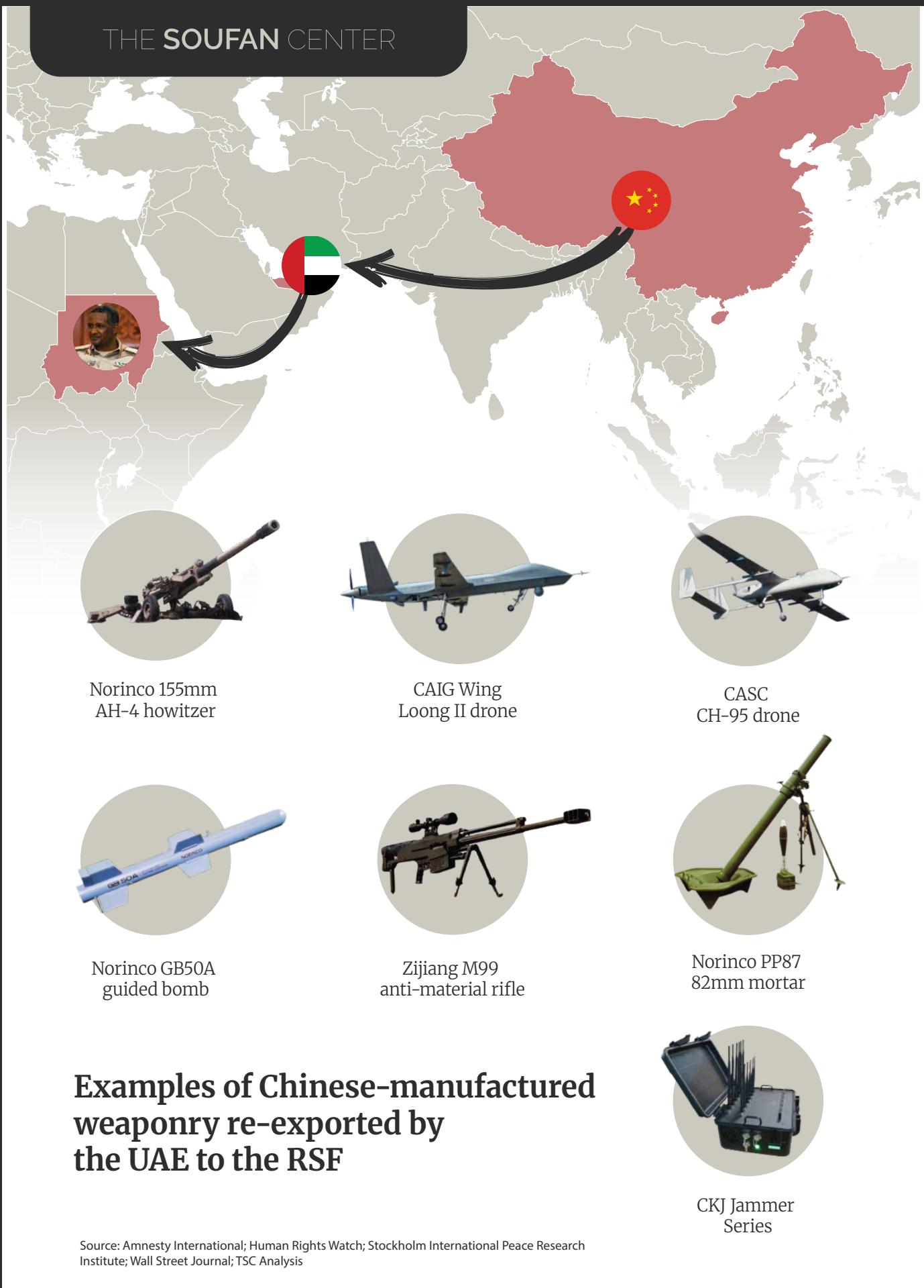
Independent open-source investigations have also found that South Sudanese and Kenyan aircraft have landed in RSF-controlled Nyala airports, where they have been photographed offloading supplies. In August 2025, the U.S. called for an investigation into Kenya's possible links to the RSF after Nairobi hosted RSF meetings earlier in the year and evidence emerged of Kenyan-registered planes transporting wounded RSF fighters. Additional reporting indicates that some Kenyan-registered aircraft delivering supplies to the RSF were in fact being operated out of Uganda.<sup>45</sup> The RSF established a fuel supply route from South Sudan earlier in the conflict, with regular shipments moving by truck from Juba to Wau, then transported in civilian vehicles into RSF-controlled areas of South Darfur—now part of a region fully consolidated under RSF control—via Raja

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44 Guillaume Lavalée and Celia Lebur, "Scramble for Sudan's Resources Fuels Brutal Civil War," *NBC Right Now*, November 20, 2025, [https://www.nbcrightnow.com/national/scramble-for-sudans-resources-fuels-brutal-civil-war/article\\_496d3f73-02c9-5360-b8ff-8708c24a1a49.html](https://www.nbcrightnow.com/national/scramble-for-sudans-resources-fuels-brutal-civil-war/article_496d3f73-02c9-5360-b8ff-8708c24a1a49.html).

45 De Koning, "Contested Corridors: The Illicit Transnational Supply Chains."

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### Examples of Chinese-manufactured weaponry re-exported by the UAE to the RSF

Source: Amnesty International; Human Rights Watch; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute; Wall Street Journal; TSC Analysis

and Kafia-Kingi. UN reporting indicates that some local South Sudanese officers were involved in facilitating the smuggling, but found no evidence of direct government involvement.<sup>46</sup> South Sudan also plays a crucial role in the RSF's gold-based financing. In 2024, hundreds of kilograms of gold extracted from RSF-controlled mines were transported through Wau and Juba in South Sudan before being airlifted to the UAE.<sup>47</sup>

Investigations have shown that individuals closely linked to the RSF leadership—particularly members of the Dagalo family and trusted intermediaries—have been identified as operating UAE-registered companies in the trading, logistics, and gold-purchasing sectors that supported procurement and transport activities linked to the RSF. These entities were involved in purchasing vehicles, spare parts, and other equipment, and in facilitating the sale of gold smuggled out of Darfur and routed through hubs such as South Sudan before reaching Dubai. The revenue generated by these UAE-based companies helped underwrite RSF's regional logistics operations, including fuel, vehicles, and weapons movements across Chad, Libya, and South Sudan, effectively linking financial flows in the Gulf to physical supply chains across East and North Africa.<sup>48</sup>

Investigations by various human rights groups have also shown that many other supply routes, such as the ones through Chad and then Libya, have facilitated the transfer of sophisticated Chinese-made guided bombs and 155mm howitzers, Chinese long-range drones such as the Wing Loong II, and

46 Panel of Experts on the Sudan, *Letter dated 15 January 2024*, UN Doc. S/2024/65.

47 De Koning, "Contested Corridors: The Illicit Trans-national Supply Chains."

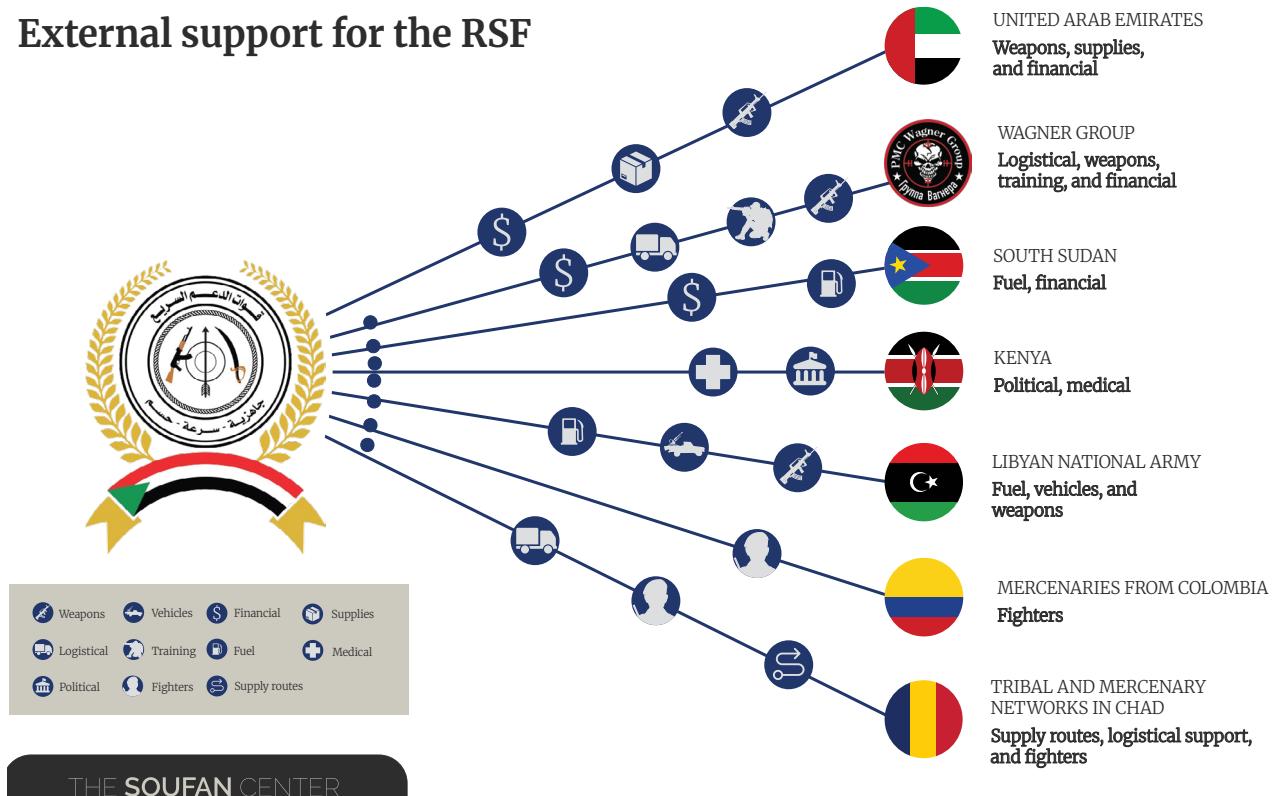
48 The Sentry, *The RSF's Business Network in the UAE*, ALERT report, October 2025.

mortar rounds originally exported to the UAE but later found in RSF convoys in Darfur.<sup>49</sup> Investigators were also able to document the presence of Chinese-manufactured Zijiang M99 anti-materiel rifles, PP87 82mm mortar bombs, and multiple portable drone jammer systems such as the CKJ Jammer Series and the Skyfend Hunter drone jammer—the latter was identified to be in possession by an SAF soldier, and reports indicate the manufacturer sells to at least one Russian company—on front lines in both Khartoum and Darfur. These systems were traced using a combination of serial-number analysis, visual identification techniques, and supply-chain mapping informed by known UAE procurement patterns. In multiple cases, the serial numbers and manufacturer codes corresponded to batches initially acquired by the UAE for its own security forces before they entered illicit re-export channels. Investigators also found that evidence of weapons manufactured in Russia, Türkiye, Serbia, Iran, Pakistan, and Yemen are present in the conflict, some of which are used by both the RSF and SAF.<sup>50</sup>

49 Amnesty International, *New Weapons Fuelling the Sudan Conflict: Expanding Existing Arms Embargo Across Sudan to Protect Civilians*, July 25, 2024, Index No. AFR 54/8252/2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2024/07/new-weapons-fuelling-the-sudan-conflict/>; and Amnesty International, "Sudan: Advanced Chinese Weaponry Provided by UAE Identified in Breach of Arms Embargo – New Investigation," May 15, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/sudan-advanced-chinese-weaponry-provided-by-uae-identified-in-breach-of-arms-embargo-new-investigation/>.

50 Human Rights Watch, *Fanning the Flames*, September 9, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/09/fanning-flames>. See also "Pakistan Inks USD\$1.5 Billion Arms Deal with Sudan, Strengthening a New Military Axis in Africa," Defence Security Asia, August 19, 2025, <https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/pakistan-sudan-1-5b-arms-deal/>.

## External support for the RSF

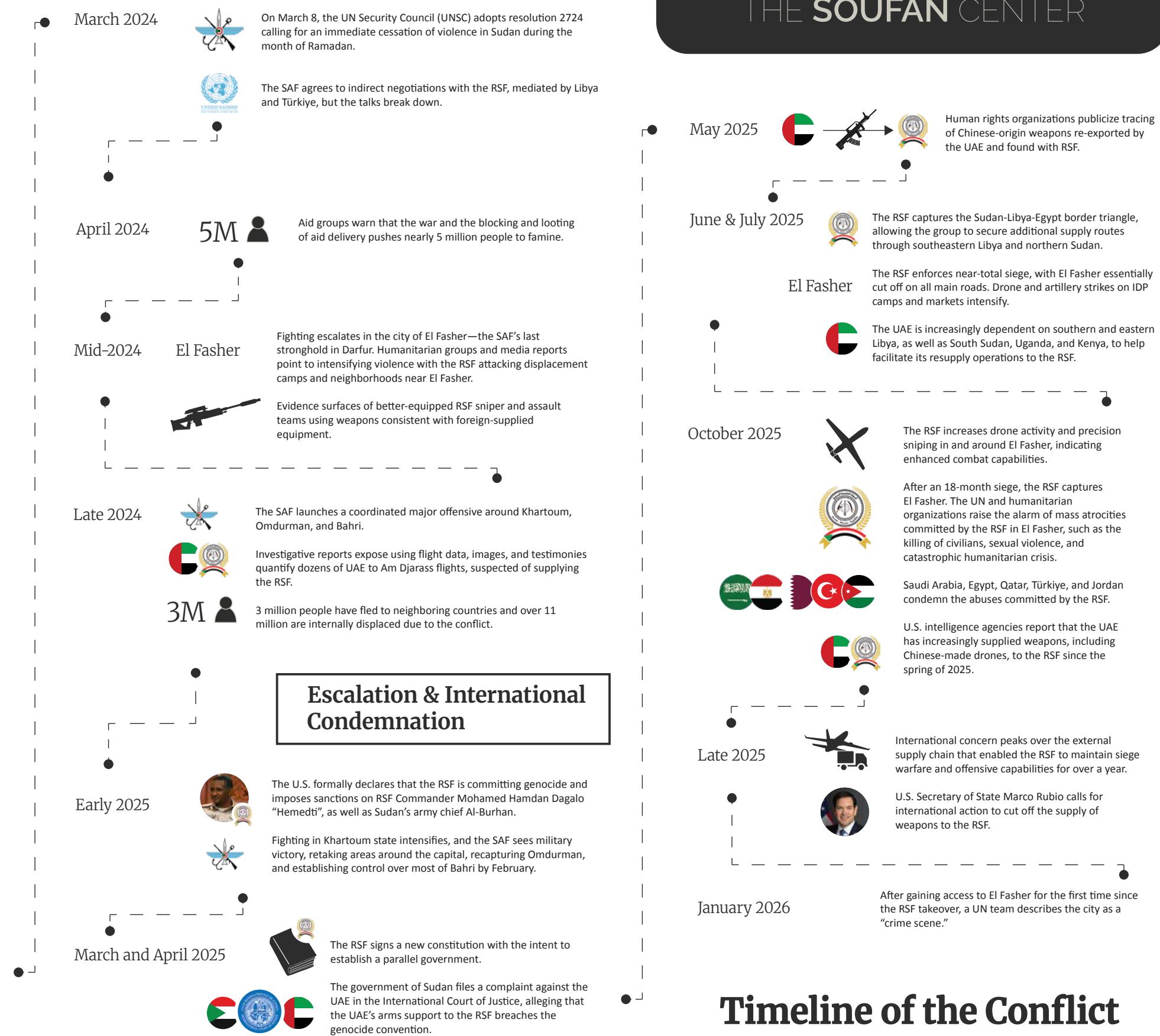
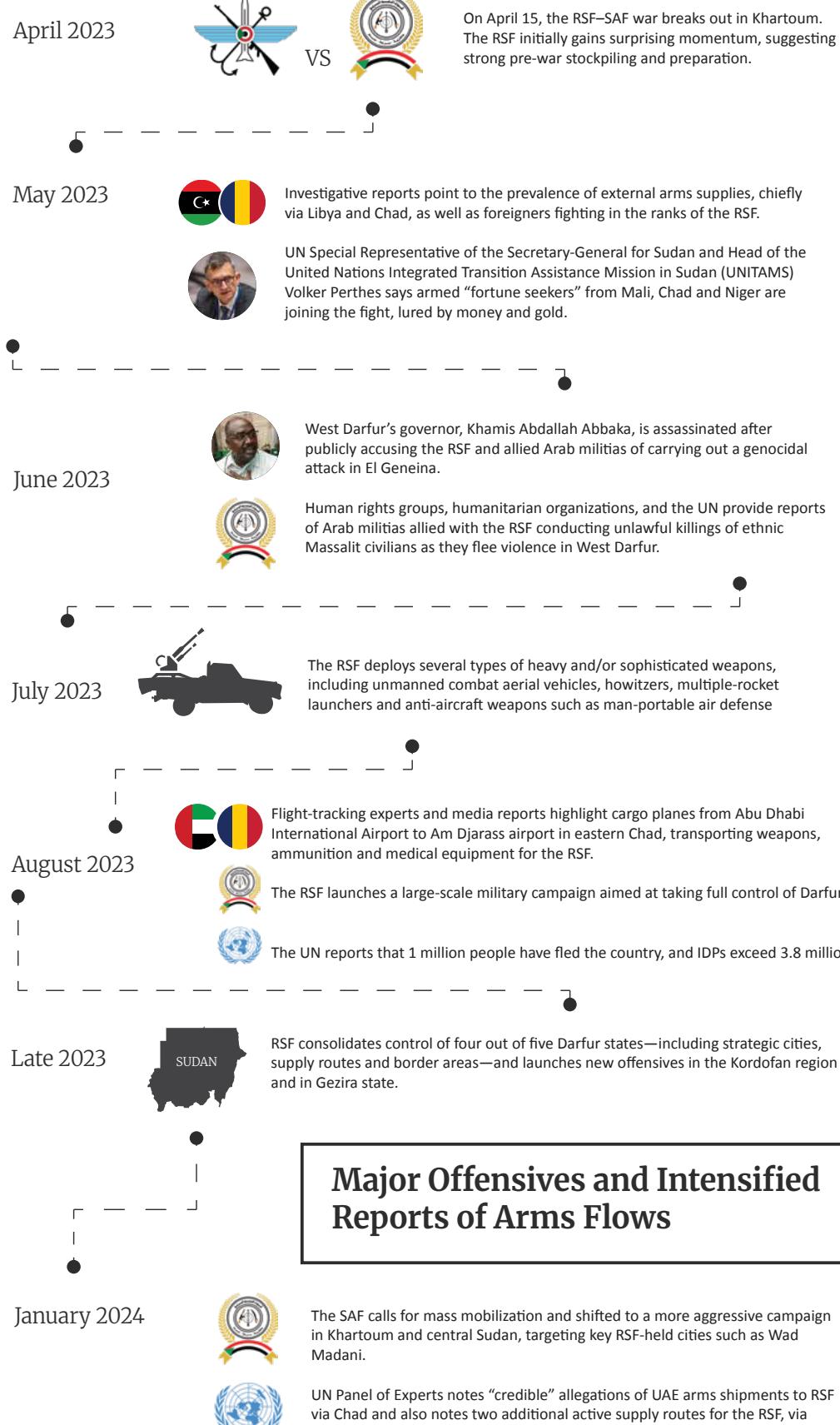


Given the scale of suffering in Sudan and the inability of international institutions like the United Nations Security Council to make any headway, there are few practical options for stopping the bloodshed in Sudan. One potential avenue is for the United States to step up and play a more tangible role, using its vast political, economic, and, if necessary, diplomatic resources to force all parties to the negotiating table in an effort to achieve a ceasefire, before moving on to discussions about Sudan's future.

## U.S. STRATEGIC INTERESTS

The civil war in Sudan has managed to drag in several of Washington's allies in the region—Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi—which made the U.S. more inclined to get

involved in helping to bring an end to the conflict. Saudi Arabia has grown increasingly concerned about the UAE's expanding footprint in the Horn of Africa and adjacent theaters. Emirati bases and operations across Libya, Somaliland, Ethiopia, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and other locations raised alarm bells in Riyadh due to their geographic breadth and their cumulative strategic impact on the Red Sea basin and the regional balance of power. The tensions that later surfaced in Yemen did not emerge in isolation; rather, they solidified deeper Saudi unease over the UAE's increasingly autonomous regional posture. Emirati engagement in Africa became particularly suspect to Saudi authorities following Abu Dhabi's support for parallel initiatives that took place outside Saudi-led frameworks in Yemen, including supporting



southern separatist actors. These actions were widely viewed in Riyadh as the final rupture. Accordingly, it was unsurprising that these concerns were elevated to the highest political levels, including during senior-level discussions in Washington amid high-profile Saudi leadership engagements.

During a November visit by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman to the United States, President Trump seemed to signal a genuine interest in helping quell the humanitarian crisis resulting from the conflict in Sudan. According to Trump, Washington would be willing to work to end the war in coordination with Saudi Arabia and other regional actors. The U.S. President described Sudan as “the most violent place on Earth” and the “single biggest humanitarian crisis” facing the international community today. The United States had been involved in peace efforts with the “Quad” (comprising the U.S., Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) prior to this meeting, with participation from U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and senior advisor for Africa, Massad Boulos; however, the November meeting appears to be the first time Trump himself has decided to become involved.

Critics have pointed to the UAE’s involvement in the Quad, given its known role in supporting the RSF and its humanitarian abuses. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio addressed this concern, stating, “That’s why they’re [the UAE] part of the Quad along with other countries involved ... And so I can just tell you at the highest levels of our government that case is being made and that pressure is being applied to the relevant parties.”<sup>51</sup> As such, the crisis tests Washington’s relationships

51 “Secretary of State Marco Rubio Remarks to the Press,” *United States Department of State*, n.d., accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/11/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-remarks-to-the-press/>.

with Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi, whose policies in Sudan are indispensable to any sustainable resolution, yet are often divergent and, frequently, destabilizing. Managing these relationships while pushing for coordinated action to stymie arms flows and support a political transition could help generate momentum toward an end to the war. Effective engagement in Sudan would demonstrate U.S. leadership and reinforce Washington’s role as a stabilizing force, both willing and able to shape outcomes in multi-layered regional conflicts. However, as Ambassador Peter Pham notes, “Until the United States with its unparalleled diplomatic, economic, and security ties with all the major external actors in Sudan, devotes strategic attention to the conflict—and that requires, at a minimum, a core team of empowered politically-connected envoys—I fear it will continue to grind on.”<sup>52</sup> On Monday January 19<sup>th</sup>, Ambassador Jeff Bartos, the U.S. Representative for UN Management and Reform, offered remarks at a UN Security Council briefing on the International Criminal Court’s investigation of the situation in Darfur and stated unequivocally that “the United States is committed to ending the horrific conflict in Sudan,” going on to say that the U.S. is seeking to “bring an end to external military support to the parties, which is fueling the violence.”<sup>53</sup>

Strategically, the United States maintains a strong interest in stabilizing the Red Sea corridor and preventing the conflict in Sudan

52 Quote provided via email correspondence with The Soufan Center, Jan 8, 2026.

53 United States Mission to the United Nations, “Remarks At A UN Security Council Briefing on the International Criminal Court’s Investigation of the Situation in Darfur, Sudan,” January 19, 2026, <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-international-criminal-courts-investigation-of-the-situation-in-darfur-sudan/>.

from spilling further across its borders into Chad, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the broader Sahel. These regions are already plagued by insurgencies, transnational criminal networks, and weak institutions. A protracted conflict risks creating power vacuums that can be filled by a range of violent non-state actors, including jihadist groups, while threatening critical maritime and commercial routes that anchor regional trade.

Several geopolitical events across the region threaten stability along this corridor. Beyond violent non-state actors, the United States has an interest in preventing a vacuum that may be filled by Russia, Iran, and other non-Western actors. First through the Wagner Group and now Africa Corps, Russia has sought access to Sudanese gold and port concessions on the Red Sea while jockeying for influence over armed factions on the ground, playing multiple sides in the conflict, as the Kremlin has done in the past. Iran has historically exploited regional instability to project power, cultivate allies, and challenge U.S. interests, an avenue of Iranian foreign policy that may accelerate in the wake of the Twelve-Day War. American inaction risks ceding the field to these actors and undermining Washington’s long-term strategic posture.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A meaningful U.S.-led diplomatic initiative might focus intensively on the most problematic component of the situation in Sudan—external support for armed actors. Using all of the tools in its policy toolkit, Washington must secure explicit commitments from Gulf partners, including the UAE, to halt the flow of weapons, ammunition, and fuel to armed groups

in Sudan. Without constraining external support mechanisms, ceasefires will remain temporary and reversible. If, throughout this process, the United States can support robust evidence-preservation and accountability efforts, including documentation of RSF atrocities and external arms flows, it would serve both justice and deterrence. It would ensure that any political agreement or negotiated settlement does not immunize perpetrators or enablers of mass atrocities.

As Cameron Hudson has noted in Congressional testimony, there are a number of shared concerns that the U.S., UAE, and other regional actors have in Sudan, including preventing the country from further collapsing; denying it as a safe haven for transnational terrorist groups; stabilizing security in the Red Sea region; and avoiding the return of Islamist leaders to positions of authority within the government or military. Above all else, Hudson correctly notes, all concerned parties share a desire to develop “the economic resources and human potential” of Sudan.<sup>54</sup>

In an email exchange, he went on to say, “The first thing the U.S. is uniquely placed to do is to mediate among the foreign backers of this war. There is no sense trying to mediate between the belligerents if they continue to be fueled by their respective patrons. Until regional powers agree on a common understanding of how to end the war and what will come next, each side will continue to back their preferred force. To do that, Washington needs to find a way to take a hard line with its allies and partners without putting at risk those valuable relationships. This will take the kind of concerted diplomacy that the U.S. has not yet shown itself capable

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<sup>54</sup> Cameron Hudson, *A Dire Crisis in Sudan: A Global Call to Action*, May 22, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/dire-crisis-sudan-global-call-action>.

of committing to in this conflict.”<sup>55</sup>

Operationally, the United States can enhance intelligence sharing with UN monitoring bodies and regional governments, enabling more precise tracking of cargo flights, ground convoys, and financial transactions associated with RSF supply chains. It can also support the establishment of real-time monitoring mechanisms for airstrips in areas where UAE-linked flights have been documented, and insist on mandatory cargo transparency for any aircraft entering conflict-adjacent zones under the guise of humanitarian aid. If diplomatic engagement proves insufficient, the Trump administration could look to a more coercive set of policy tools, including designating specific companies, aircraft, or intermediaries involved in RSF resupply under U.S. sanctions authorities, while also working to enhance the financial scrutiny of gold-smuggling networks connected to the RSF and its foreign partners. As a backstop, the U.S. could begin preparing contingency sanctions packages targeting individuals or entities implicated in violations of the Darfur arms embargo. Hudson argues that Trump is likely to deploy his influence in highly tactical ways, such as leveraging development assistance and diplomatic pressure to advance near-term U.S. interests rather than addressing the war’s underlying drivers.<sup>56</sup> Extending U.S. assistance to include a focus on some of the more fundamental root causes of the conflict would increase the prospects that any agreement reached is more sustainable.

By signaling a willingness to impose targeted,

yet reversible measures, the United States can create incentives for compliance among regional actors who may underestimate the legal and reputational costs of continued involvement. Given the UAE’s involvement in private-sector ventures, including professional sports, the U.S. government could seek to pressure organizations like the National Basketball Association (NBA) to distance itself from Abu Dhabi as a means of protest.<sup>57</sup> This combination of diplomatic, operational, and enforcement actions provides a coherent pathway for the United States to influence the war’s trajectory and move Sudan toward de-escalation.

Through bilateral security cooperation and multilateral frameworks involving Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the U.S. can exert significant leverage over the UAE, including through private, high-level diplomacy that emphasizes the strategic, reputational, and legal consequences of continued support for the RSF. A credible U.S. policy would place responsibility for de-escalation on both Sudanese combatants and their external backers. This can only succeed if diplomatic engagement with the UAE and other regional actors articulates explicit red lines, namely, that the continued arming and enabling of RSF forces is incompatible with international norms, with the legal obligations of states, and with the strategic relationships those actors seek to maintain with the United States and its partners.

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55 Quote provided via email correspondence with The Soufan Center Jan 6, 2026.

56 “Semafor’s Predictions for US-Africa Relations in 2026,” January 2, 2026, <https://www.semafor.com/article/01/02/2026/semafors-predictions-for-us-africa-relations-in-2026>.

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57 Karim Zidan, “As Sudan Burns, the NBA’s Embrace of the UAE Shows How Sport Enables Atrocity,” *Sport, The Guardian*, December 13, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2025/dec/13/nba-uae-sudan-sportswashing-rsf-war-crimes>.

## CONCLUSION

The trajectory of Sudan's conflict remains deeply concerning but has only recently risen to the level of policy priority for the Trump administration, which has been preoccupied with a range of other foreign policy crises, including Gaza, Venezuela, and Ukraine. Without swift and decisive action to constrain the RSF's external sponsors, the war will continue to escalate, regional actors will deepen their involvement, and Sudan will risk fragmentation akin to Libya, Syria, or Yemen, with the potential for similar outcomes. Yet, if the link between the UAE and RSF can be broken, the conditions for a negotiated settlement improve dramatically, especially with robust U.S. diplomatic participation that remains focused on core issues and sees the process through to completion. Washington's relationships with Gulf partners, its diplomatic weight in

the region, and its normative commitment to atrocity prevention collectively place the United States at the center of any pathway to de-escalation and sustainable cessation of the conflict.

Peace in Sudan requires more than moral appeals or fragmented regional initiatives. It requires confronting the reality that external actors have played a decisive role in shaping the conflict's course and cobbling together a well-resourced, pragmatic strategy to address the relationship driving some of the instability. If it is willing to use its influence assertively and coherently, the United States can be the catalyst for that shift. In the absence of such leadership, however, Sudan will remain trapped in a cycle of violence driven not only by internal divisions but by the external meddling that has helped arm its most destructive forces.

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## About The Soufan Center

The Soufan Center is an independent nonprofit organization based in New York City. Our mission is to provide cutting-edge research, analysis, and strategies to anticipate and counter the world's most urgent security challenges.





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