Research Article

Sudan Conflict and Its Impact on Regional Relations and Humanitarian Stability

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Abstract

The paper explores the current conflict in Sudan, which started in April 2023, with an emphasis on how it affects humanitarian situations, regional ties, and national governance. Using a qualitative research methodology, it uses secondary data to describe the origins and humanitarian effects of the conflict, and to analyze the impact of the conflict on Sudan's diplomatic and regional relation. It is also to evaluate the role of regional and international actors in shaping conflict dynamics and responses. The extent of humanitarian relocation and the degradation of essential services are also highlighted. The paper provides a framework for understanding the conflict's wider geopolitical ramifications and

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makes suggestions for inclusive peacebuilding and regional collaboration by differentiating between descriptive patterns and analytical insights. The results are intended to guide future studies on conflict resolution in fragile nations as well as policy responses.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Humanitarian Crisis, International Mediation, Regional Peacebuilding, Sudan Conflict

Introduction

Africa has been characterised as a volatile conflict arena, and between 2015 and 2016, it witnessed more armed conflicts than any other continent (UCDP, 2017; SIPRI, 2018). Even though conventional conflicts, including civil war and intercommunal conflicts, are persistent, new types of conflicts have emerged in the African narrative, taking on a form and space that were unusual in the two decades after the end of the Cold War (Akinola, 2023). The ongoing conflict in Sudan reflects a longstanding failure to resolve structural power imbalances and regional marginalization (Verhoeven, 2023). Decades of centralized governance, elite competition, and the exclusion of peripheral regions have contributed to a fragile state structure vulnerable to recurrent instability (Hoffmann & Lanfranchi, 2023).

The history of the Horn of Africa is diversely rich, with an embroidery of ethnic groups and cultures. Precisely, Sudan has an extensive history of ethno-cultural diversity that has frequently been a double-edged sword. On one front, such diversity can be a basis of strength, but on the other front, it often turns into a cause for disputes and conflicts. There are many different ethnic groups in Sudan, and each has its unique language, customs, and historical experiences. The nation is split between the Arab-dominated South and the Arab-dominated North. The legacy of colonial rule, the period during which Sudan was governed by the British and Egyptians, further exacerbated such separations. In this regard, the North was intensely impacted by the Arab language, customs, culture, and the Islamic religion throughout the colonial era. These historical ties with the Arab world resulted in a sense of identity and

superiority among some Northerners, which frequently resulted in the marginalization of other minorities (Babalola & Akinrinde, 2024).

Additionally, the instability in the Arab world, formally known as the Arab Spring disputes, which culminated in major political turmoil and conflicts across the Middle East and North African (MENA and Sub-Saharan) regions in early 2010, does not exempt Sudan. Sudan, formally known as the Republic of Sudan, has had a complex and conflictual political history. As such, the country experienced several armed conflicts. It occurred between the North and the South, which resulted in the secession of South Sudan as an independent state in 2011 (Ali, 2022). In addition, the struggle for economic resources (land and oil), as well as traditional, cultural, and religious disparity, are fundamental components of Sudan's conflictual history. Similarly, revolutions are not a new development to Sudan and its citizens. The most recent and massive revolution in Sudan broke out in mid-month of 2018, which is the third such revolution that occurred in the country and ultimately led to the ousting of Al-Bashir's regime in 2019 (Meservey, 2023). The recently overthrown administration was left with a legacy of institutional collapse, corruption, societal collapse, and intense disputed conflicts. These historical patterns of political exclusion, armed uprisings, and elite power struggles have culminated in the 2023 conflict, where the struggle between the SAF and RSF reflects deep-rooted institutional fragmentation and unresolved tensions from previous eras.

Relatively, long-boiling tensions between Sudan's two most prominent generals exploded into open warfare on April 15, 2023. A succession of ceasefires has failed, and intense violence has ensued

in the capital city, Khartoum, and other locations throughout the country (Meservey, 2023). In a short period, millions of people were displaced, Sudan's infrastructure and economy were destroyed, and the society became more militarized and polarized as a result of the severe conflict that broke out between the Sudanese top-most generals in the transitional government, Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemeti), head of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the head of Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), that triggered the civilians out on April 15, 2023 (Kurtz, 2024).

Furthermore, given Sudan's strategical position, experts have recognized the extent of its strategic significance in relation to many other nations due to its diverse geographical topography, which includes hills, mountains, valleys, and desert areas, in addition to its most valuable resources, such as enormous fertile lands, and the most significant benefits of the Nile River. Similarly, the country produces numerous natural resources and manages the Red Sea region, with copper, iron ore, gold, zinc, and silver (estimated reserves of around 1,500 tons), coupled with gold and iron (with estimated reserves of roughly 1.5 million tons), in addition to over 1.5 million tons of oil, gas, and uranium (FAO, 2015). Despite such enormous wealth, Sudan's economy barely improved and lacks a pulse for development.

Moreover, a significant amount of Sudan's wealth has been depleted over the years by disputes and instability, which have hindered the optimum use of the natural resource profits and their conversion into public infrastructure in the Sudanese economy, fostering the development of human and social capital, organizing

infrastructure, generating wealth, and formulating new job opportunities on a large scale. Sudan continues to suffer from these internal issues to this day (NSDS, 2016). Relatively, an increasing number of cross-border disputes, such as the construction process of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and the armed conflict in al-Fashaga and Northern Ethiopia, have exacerbated distrust between Sudan and Ethiopia. Similarly, the conflict in Sudan has implicated itself not only with Ethiopia but also spiralled with border issues with South Sudan and Egypt, endangering regional stability and border security as well as state-to-state relations (Cinar & Ozer, 2023).

The Horn of Africa's strategic position and wealth of natural resources have turned it into an epicentre for foreign powers looking to further their interest in the region. Such interventions have frequently taken the nature of proxy wars, in which major influence armed groups and provide support to various groups, exacerbating the existing armed conflicts in vulnerable nations like Sudan and its neighbouring countries. Relatively, nations such as Eritrea have a long history of getting involved in regional wars, assisting various armed factions and militants in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia. The persistent conflict has led to numerous casualties, a steady influx of refugees seeking protection in neighbouring nations, and further excruciating instability in the region. The protracted civil war has resulted in extensive destruction, fatalities, and violations of human rights, all of which have contributed to the country's humanitarian crises (Babalola & Akinrinde, 2024).

The majority of the violence has been directed at civilians, encountering attacks in their homes, schools and universities, and medical facilities. The absence of security and the prevalence of

armed factions have made it challenging for humanitarian organisations to deliver much-needed aid and support to the impacted populations (Keen, 2024). In this regard, more than 11.7 million people have been displaced both inside and outside of Sudan as a result of the conflict that broke out in April 2023, between the Sudanese Army Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Due to this development, Sudan has the highest rate of starvation cases in Eastern Africa, with over 3.7 million children between the ages of 6 and 56 months and 1 million pregnant and lactating mothers who are suffering from acute malnutrition. Similarly, acute food insecurity affects around 26 million people, with 755,000 (more than half of the population) at risk of famine and hunger. Relatively, over 20 months of intense conflict have destabilised Sudan into the fastest-growing displacement disaster, with an average of an astounding 20,000 people displaced daily.

Furthermore, the persistent conflict has forced millions of citizens to leave their residences in search of safety, which resulted in Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) seeking refuge in camps within the nation, and numerous others have crossed international territorial borders seeking asylum in neighbouring nations (Hutchinson, 2005). In the same stance, the inflow of refugees into neighbouring nations has placed tremendous strain on host communities and their inadequate relations, overwhelming nations like Chad, Uganda, South Sudan, and Ethiopia with the large number of Sudanese refugees looking for asylum. It has exacerbated the instability in the region, worsening resource shortages and animosity between host communities and refugees (Keen, 2024). Relatively, the displacement of the masses has disrupted livelihoods, detached

families, and led to the loss of property and assets. Consequently, refugees and IDPs frequently face terrible living conditions in camps and lack access to food, clean water, medical treatment, and education. Additionally, children are especially vulnerable, facing a high risk of malnutrition, illness, and restricted access to safety services and education (Hutchinson, 2005).

Rekindled in April 2023, Sudan's continuous conflict has exacerbated humanitarian situations, damaged regional relations, and increased political instability. The fundamental structural problems, elite division, resource competitiveness, and weak state institutions, remain unresolved in spite of numerous peace initiatives. This study looks into how these internal dynamics and the interests of regional actors keep the conflict going and prevent a lasting peace.

Research Questions

1. What are the main causes and characteristics of the ongoing Sudanese conflict?
2. How has the conflict affected Sudan's humanitarian situation and regional relations?
3. What roles have international and regional actors played in either mitigating or exacerbating the crisis?

Objectives of the Study

1. To describe the origins and humanitarian effects of the conflict.
2. To analyse the impact of the conflict on Sudan's diplomatic and regional relations.

3. To evaluate the role of regional and international actors in shaping conflict dynamics and responses.

Literature Review

To analyse the complex nature of the Sudanese conflict and its implications on regional relations and humanitarian stability, this study adopts a dual-theoretical approach:

1. Political Economy of Conflict Theory and Ethnic Conflict Theories. These frameworks provide a multidimensional lens through which both structural and identity-driven causes of conflict can be analysed in the Sudanese context.

2. Political Economy of Conflict Theory: According to Collier and Hoeffler (2004), economic goals, particularly control over natural resources, are frequently the driving forces behind both internal and external engagement in civil wars. Regional powers like the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia have expressed a great deal of interest in Sudan because of its enormous gold reserves, oil transportation routes, and advantageous location near the Red Sea. These nations have used military and political diplomacy to gain strategic economic advantages as well as regional stability. For instance, international marine trade and South Sudan's oil exports are directly impacted by the control of Port Sudan. This approach aids in explaining how specific economic considerations, rather than just ideology or diplomacy, drive regional interactions. As a result, the report strikes a compromise between a greater examination of the economic motives driving regional engagement and

extending the conflict and a humanitarian focus, particularly on internally displaced people.

3. Ethnic Conflict Theory: The ethnic dynamics can be understood through theories of ethnic conflict. The ethnic security dilemma (Posen, 1993) explains how, in fragile or collapsing states like Sudan, ethnic or regional groups often perceive one another as existential threats, leading to the formation of self-defence militias and preemptive violence. This has been particularly evident in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and South Kordofan, where mistrust and fear have escalated localised conflicts into national crises. Furthermore, instrumentalist theories argue that elites frequently manipulate ethnic identities to consolidate power, mobilise followers, or justify access to strategic resources (Kaufman, 2006). In Sudan, both the SAF and RSF have appealed to ethnic loyalties and regional grievances, deepening fragmentation and undermining national cohesion. Incorporating these perspectives allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how identity-based politics intersect with material interests to sustain violence and complicated peace efforts.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the complex and evolving dynamics of the Sudanese conflict, its regional implications, and humanitarian consequences. The qualitative approach is appropriate given the need to interpret political, social, and economic narratives surrounding the conflict,

rather than measure discrete variables (Creswell, 2013). The research relies entirely on secondary data, including peer-reviewed academic publications, policy reports, government and intergovernmental documents (such as from the UN, AU, and IGAD), and verified media sources. These materials were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and publication within the past ten years, with a focus on post-2019 developments.

To ensure the transparency and reliability of findings, data from multiple sources were triangulated to identify recurring themes and contradictions across different perspectives. Priority was given to sources with institutional credibility, such as international organisations and recognised conflict databases (e.g., ACLED, SIPRI, UCDP). The study draws on an extensive and up-to-date body of literature, including both scholarly publications and policy-oriented sources such as UN reports, IGAD communiqués, and ACLED conflict data, to ensure a comprehensive analysis of Sudan's ongoing crisis. While secondary data offer rich contextual insights, the study acknowledges limitations, including potential bias in political reporting and the lack of primary verification. Nonetheless, this method provides a comprehensive basis for analysing patterns of governance breakdown, external influence, and humanitarian degradation in Sudan.

Data Analysis

The analysis employed a thematic content analysis approach to extract insights from the collected secondary data. Relevant documents and reports were systematically reviewed and manually coded to identify dominant themes, such as political

instability, resource competition, regional power influence, displacement, and humanitarian collapse. Themes were derived inductively, emerging through repeated readings and comparative analysis across diverse sources. Differences in emphasis or interpretation between policy reports, academic studies, and media narratives were critically examined to capture both consensus and dissenting perspectives. This method facilitated a nuanced understanding of the Sudanese conflict by linking thematic patterns to structural factors and actor motivations. Thematic clustering also helped trace how domestic and regional factors overlap to produce compounding effects on Sudan's stability and diplomatic relations.

Findings and Analysis

The findings reveal that the Sudanese conflict is driven by a convergence of elite rivalries, institutional decay, economic opportunism, and regional interventions. The conflict between the SAF and RSF is emblematic of deep-seated institutional weaknesses and the fragmentation of military and political authority, aligning with the political economy of conflict theory as articulated by Collier and Hoeffler (2004). These rival factions are engaged in a competition for control over Sudan's lucrative gold mines, urban centres, and strategic ports, which serve as both economic lifelines and instruments of political leverage. The involvement of foreign actors such as Egypt, the UAE, and Russia underscores the regionalisation of the conflict. These countries support different factions based on their geopolitical and economic interests. Egypt's support for the SAF is rooted in its interest in maintaining influence over Nile Basin politics and regional security, while the UAE and

Russia have backed the RSF to secure access to gold exports and regional military influence. This dynamic aligns with de Waal's (2019) concept of the political marketplace, where external and internal actors engage in transactional politics to consolidate influence.

Ethnic dimensions of the conflict further deepen its complexity. Both the SAF and RSF have mobilised ethnic militias and local alliances, drawing on pre-existing communal grievances. This tactic mirrors the ethnic security dilemma described by Posen (1993), where groups arm themselves in anticipation of attacks from rival communities. The manipulation of ethnic narratives by political elites, as described by Kaufman (2006), has contributed to cycles of mistrust, displacement, and retaliatory violence, especially in Darfur and the Kordofan regions.

The humanitarian consequences are catastrophic. According to UNOCHA (2024), over 8 million people have been displaced, and more than 25 million require humanitarian assistance. Health systems have collapsed, markets have been destroyed, and food insecurity is spreading. These outcomes are not merely incidental but are strategically exacerbated by warring factions that weaponise access to aid and infrastructure. In line with the political economy framework, this use of humanitarian crises to control populations and extract concessions underscores how violence is used instrumentally.

Additionally, diplomatic attempts have been dispersed and mostly unsuccessful. Competing regional mediation efforts by the Gulf states, the AU, and IGAD are frequently influenced by the strategic objectives of the interveners and lack coordination. The constraints of international mediation in situations where the

underlying political economy of violence is still present are reflected in this incoherence in peacebuilding. As a result, every attempt at resolution must start by addressing the systems that encourage conflict and support war economies.

Overall, the integration of political economy and ethnic conflict theories offers a coherent lens through which the Sudanese conflict can be interpreted. The findings confirm that the war is not solely a humanitarian tragedy or a power struggle but a complex intersection of economic exploitation, identity manipulation, and regional competition. Addressing these dimensions is essential for any sustainable peace framework.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has examined the 2023 Sudanese conflict through the lenses of political economy and ethnic conflict theory, revealing a complex interplay of elite fragmentation, economic incentives, and identity-based mobilisation. The findings demonstrate that the conflict is not a spontaneous outbreak of violence but a calculated struggle over political authority, access to strategic resources, and regional influence. The power rivalry between the SAF and RSF, intensified by foreign sponsorship from actors such as Egypt, the UAE, and Russia, aligns with the political marketplace theory, where transactional alliances are used to sustain militarised competition.

The use of ethnic militias and the manipulation of identity underscore the relevance of ethnic security dilemmas and instrumentalist theories. These dynamics have aggravated longstanding communal divisions and contributed to a massive humanitarian crisis. Over 8 million Sudanese have been displaced, and humanitarian

corridors remain restricted, reflecting a deliberate strategy of control through deprivation.

Due to their failure in large part to address the structural causes of violence, attempts at conflict mediation have remained disjointed and ineffectual. Even if they pose as peacemakers, regional actors frequently have strategic or financial goals to keep the conflict going. There has been no continuous negotiation between the main fighting factions as a consequence of mediation efforts, which have been led by third parties like the African Union, IGAD, and Gulf governments. These actors frequently work simultaneously, which reduces their effectiveness and cohesion. Due to mistrust and shifting alignments, direct negotiations between the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese Armed Forces have not resulted in long-lasting accords.

In conclusion, a sustainable resolution to the Sudanese conflict requires dismantling war economies, reconstructing inclusive political institutions, and neutralising the role of identity-based manipulation. Future research should focus on localised peace-building models, post-conflict reconstruction, and the accountability mechanisms needed to prevent recurrence. By anchoring policy and academic analysis in both economic and identity-based frameworks, stakeholders can develop more effective interventions that respond to the root causes rather than the symptoms of Sudan's prolonged instability.

Recommendations for Peace Mediation and Negotiation Strategy

Any Sudanese dispute resolution procedure must make a distinction between negotiation and mediation. Future efforts must

be more inclusive, transparent, and unbiased, even though regional and international organisations like IGAD, the US, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have tried mediation. Under the new IGAD-led platform, direct negotiations between key conflict parties such as Al-Burhan and Hemedti should be revived, ideally grounded in their December 2023 agreements.

To prevent the impression of bias or political manipulation, mediators ought to be chosen from impartial nations with no stake in Sudan. It is imperative that the disparate projects that were previously undertaken by various parties be combined into a single, cohesive plan. All pertinent parties, like the armed groups, opposition forces, civil society, and displaced communities who are open to a peaceful, negotiated resolution, must be included in this plan, which must represent a long-term political vision.

Rather than seeking revenge, the process should prioritize national reconciliation and institutional inclusion. This means integrating all legitimate actors, including those who were excluded from the Framework Agreement, into the transitional government and constitutional reform process. The overarching goal should be to restore political, economic, and social stability, leading to a credible transitional framework, the drafting of a new Constitution, and national elections within two years.

Finally, peace negotiations must be anchored in a durable ceasefire. Many early attempts failed because ceasefires were violated or poorly enforced. Future negotiations should be grounded in clear, monitored ceasefire agreements to ensure the viability of political dialogue.

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