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Research Article

Battle Over Power Usurpation: Mapping the Sudan Civil War Through the Conflict Wheel Model

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Abstract

The two long years of brutal war have severely decimated Sudan. With no sign of a ceasefire or peace talks in action yet, Sudan currently presents the largest humanitarian crisis in the world ever recorded. The study examines the causal factors of the ongoing Sudanese civil war, specifically using a unique conflict analysis approach called the Conflict Wheel Model (CWM), which emphasizes identifying key actors, issues, context, dynamics, causation, and exit options, thereby providing an insightful explanation of the conflict. The study relies on a qualitative approach, using a case study and thematic analysis of various available secondary data sources. The application of the CWM suggests that the failed transitional power-sharing process after Al-Bashir's coup d'état, the Rapid Support Force's hegemonic rise posing a threat to the Sudanese army's leadership, and consistent external influence over Sudan's strategic location and resources have created a violent backdrop for power-reigning competition between two Sudanese tyrannical generals. Additionally, the study successfully unveils past ethnic politicization, the legacy of "divide and rule," and repeated military coups since post-colonization as latent determinants that have kept the seeds of war alive for years. The study proposes recommendations toward peace, including drafting a provisional vision of post-war governance, addressing ethnic grievances, preserving civilian representation, decentralizing the military's monopolization of state power, and detaching foreign strategic engagement through the establishment of Multilateral Peace-Building Strategies at the international level. Overall, this paper concludes that peace initiatives can be achieved only through the adoption of a holistic approach from all sides.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The concurrent Sudanese civil war has been a grave concern for world peace and stability due to its severity and causation. To be precise, Sudan is located in northeast Africa and is one of the largest countries on the continent, covering 1.9 million sq km (734,000 sq miles). It shares borders with seven countries and the Red Sea. The River Nile also flows through the country, making it strategically important for foreign powers. Predominantly, Sudan's population is Muslim, and the country's official languages are Arabic and English. Even before the war began, Sudan was one of the poorest countries in the world, despite being a gold-producing nation (Booty & Chothia, 2021). In the global political science realm, there exist various interpretations regarding the definition, origin, causes, and consequences of civil war.

Nevertheless, civil war is considered an extraordinary stage in the transformation of a state's social and political system (Bader, 2020). Mark and Norma defined a civil war as "a politically organized, large-scale, sustained, physically violent conflict that occurs within a country principally among large or numerically important groups of its inhabitants or citizens over the monopoly of physical force" (Gersovitz & Kriger, 2013). In terms of "battle-related deaths," more than 1,000 deaths per year qualify a conflict as a civil war (Wallensteen & Sollenberg, 1999). It has been more than two years since Sudan has been shackled by severe conflict following the outbreak of civil war in 2023, where a power struggle between two military leaders lies at the core. According to the United Nations, approximately 150,000 lives have been lost, and about 12 million people have been forced to flee their homes to date (Ochieng *et al.*, 2025). Reports indicate that more than two years of continuous war have led to a serious humanitarian crisis, affecting the security of neighboring countries due to a massive influx of

refugees crossing borders. Hence, the Sudan war has triggered major regional turbulence within the African and Arab border regions (Estifanos, 2025). The looting of humanitarian aid by warring parties and its role in creating famine has been briefly discussed in humanitarian consultant Keen’s study (Keen, 2024). Similarly, the monopolization of state power, poor economic conditions, and divisions among ethnic groups were behind the eleven-year civil war in Sierra Leone from 1991 to 2002 (Muslim, 2012). Therefore, this paper aims to systematically analyze the core issues of discord, the dynamics of the involved parties, and the historical background, while identifying key variables at play and providing an integrated picture of the conflict from the perspective of a conflict analysis framework. For this purpose, the study employs the Conflict Wheel Model (CWM) of conflict analysis developed by Bernard Mayer and Christopher Moore (Fisher *et al.*, 2007). This Conflict Wheel Model is popular for its practicality, and there is substantial evidence of its successful application in various conflict contexts, although not yet in the case of Sudan. Salihu and Enwere applied the Conflict Wheel Model to Nigeria’s farmers–herders conflict to uncover multidimensional socio-economic, political, and cultural factors sustaining the conflict. Their study also highlighted government failure in strategies for preserving and effectively managing the country’s scarce ecological resources as a trigger for the conflict (Salihu & Enwere, 2023). Erunke (2023) similarly viewed Nigeria’s herdsmen–farmers conflict as competition

over natural resources. Likewise, to identify the major causes behind the resumption of terrorism by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan following the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan, Muhammad and Arshi employed the Conflict Wheel Model. Their study revealed that grievances among people living along the Pak–Afghan border, poverty, weak legislative structures, and the interests of involved actors have played roles in sustaining terrorist activities, pointing to Pakistan’s failed law enforcement system (Ayaz & Hashmi, 2024). Therefore, it is envisaged that the findings of this paper will contribute to a more precise understanding of the Sudanese civil war, unveiling its complexities and offering insights into how it may be better managed, thereby contributing a new pathway to addressing the Sudan crisis.

A. Research Objectives

Basically, the main goal of this paper is to unfold the historical, political, and humanitarian aspects of the ongoing Sudanese civil war, especially by employing the renowned Conflict Wheel Model of conflict analysis. It endeavors to:

1. Understand the root causes and effects of the conflict through an established theoretical approach.
2. Identify the structural, historical, and socio-political dynamics playing roles in shaping the conflict.
3. Find a justified point where conflicting parties can work on conflict transformation to bring about peace.

B. Background History of Sudan’s Political Crisis

TABLE I A TIMELINE OF SUDAN’S HISTORY CAN BE PROJECTED AS BELOW (SUDAN COUNTRY, 2023)

Time Period	Significant Political Changes
1899-1955	Sudan was under joint British-Egyptian rule. In reality, Sudan was effectively administered as a British colony.
1952	Egyptian revolution triggered a move towards Sudanese independence. Egypt and Britain allowed both Sudanese regions, north and south, to vote on independence.
1955-1972	First Sudanese Civil War between north and south over demands for more regional autonomy by southern Sudan region. Some 500,000 were estimated to have been killed. A 1972 peace agreement failed to satisfactorily dispel tensions.
1956	Finally, Sudan became independent.
1969	Colonel Gaafar Nimeiry carried out a coup. Parliament and political parties were abolished.
1977	Limited political pluralism introduced.
1983	Numeiry introduced Sharia Islamic law.
1983-2005	Second Sudanese Civil War between the central Sudanese government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army. Largely a continuation of the first civil war. The war led to the independence of South Sudan in 2011. Some two million people die as a result of war, famine and disease caused by the conflict.
1989	Colonel Omar Al-Bashir carried out a military coup. Al-Bashir appointed himself as president in 1993.
2003-2020	War in Darfur between the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) rebel groups against the government, which they said oppressing Darfur’s non-Arab population. The government responded with a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Darfur’s non-Arabs. The UN estimated up to 300,000 are killed in the fighting.
2009	International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for President Al-Bashir on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity relating to the conflict in Darfur.
2011	South Sudan gained independence following years of war with the central government in Khartoum.
2019	Army ousts President Bashir after months of protests against his rule.
2020	Sudan signed peace deal with the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), a coalition of rebel groups from the western region of Darfur and the southern states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile, to end the fighting in Darfur.
2023	Power struggle within the military government sees months of widespread fighting between the regular army and members of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Hundreds have died, and some five million people have been forced to flee their homes.

To understand today’s complex governance struggle in Sudan, it is necessary to look back at its colonial history. After gaining independence from the British in 1956, modern Sudanese history was plagued by bloodshed due to continuous conflict and instability, including two long wars between the north and south and the war in Darfur. Until its split in 2011, Sudan was the largest and one of the most geographically diverse states on the African continent. The atrocities of the Darfur war led to the independence of South Sudan, which plunged Sudan into unprecedented economic and political perplexity. Later, the protest movement against authoritarian rule succeeded in toppling the Omar al-Bashir government in a coup attempt in 2019; however, the newly gained freedom was lost in the vicious power struggle between military dictatorships in 2023.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Scholar Collins (1995) emphasizes that conflict is a “serious disagreement and debate over something important” and, therefore, a “serious discrepancy between two or more views, ideas, or desires” (Weerasinghe, 2022). Fisher, in his book *Working with Conflict*, stated that “conflict analysis is a practical process through which we examine and understand the presence of any conflict from varied perspectives. This understanding then builds the basis for relevant strategies that can be identified, developed, and put into action for the resolution of that conflict.” Besides, the Danish Refugee Council considers conflict analysis an integral part of addressing any conflict, as it provides reliable insights into the conflict in question and generates practical

recommendations that best fit its resolution (Conflict Analysis, 2020). Conflict analysis becomes much easier when it incorporates diverse, pragmatic, and adaptable tools and techniques. These tools also help us learn from previous failures and successes. Some popular techniques and tools suggested by Fisher *et al.* include the stages of conflict, timelines, the conflict tree, conflict mapping, the Conflict Wheel Model, the ABC triangle, force-field analysis, the onion model, pillars, and the pyramid model (Fisher *et al.*, 2007).

As this paper adopts the Conflict Wheel Model for analyzing the Sudanese civil war, it is imperative to understand how this model works. The Conflict Wheel Model of conflict analysis is divided into six sections and is presented in the diagram below as Figure 1, highlighting its key components. Here,

1. *Actors/Relations*: Actors, or “parties,” are people, organizations, or countries involved in a conflict. If they are directly involved in the conflict, they are called “conflict parties”; if they become involved in transforming the conflict, they are called “third parties.” Stakeholders have an interest in the conflict or its outcome but are not directly involved. Conflicts, by definition, refer to frictional relationships between parties.
2. *Issues*: Issues are the topics of the conflict-what people discuss or fight about.
3. *Dynamics*: Dynamics refer to the level of escalation of the conflict, the intensity of interaction, the “temperament,” and the energy of a conflict that transforms people.

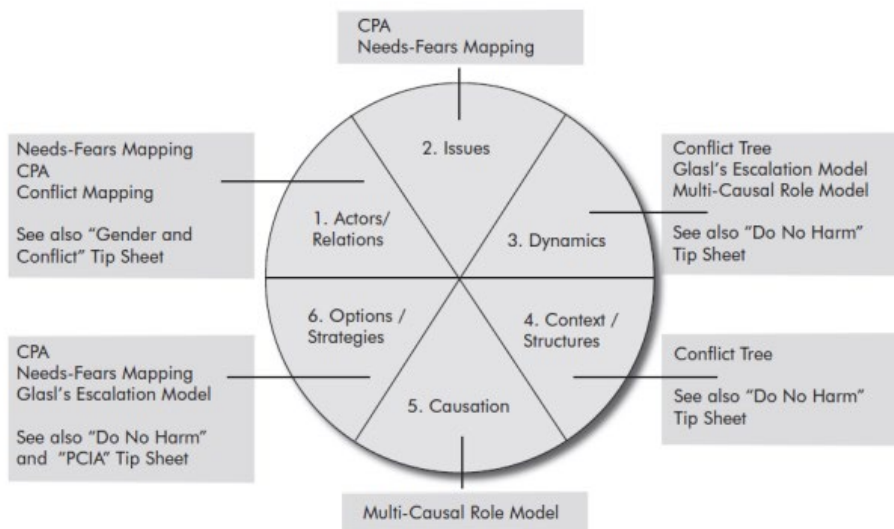


Fig.1 Conflict Wheel Model (Mason & Rychard, 2005)

4. *Context/Structures*: The conflict context and structural factors are often outside the conflict system being examined. Structural violence refers to violence that is not directly caused by people but by the economic and political systems in place, for example, those causing poverty.
5. *Causation*: Conflicts are never mono-causal but multi-causal, with systemic factors interacting. Rather than

stating that everything is related to everything, it is helpful to differentiate between different “causes” or influencing factors.

6. *Options/Strategies*: This point examines ways to deal with the conflict, including strategies that are used or could be used, as well as efforts by conflict parties or third parties to de-escalate the conflict (Mason & Rychard, 2005).

III. METHODOLOGY

This paper employs the popular qualitative case study method to identify underlying reasons and understand the nature of the ongoing atrocious civil war in Sudan. It depends mainly on various secondary data sources, such as journal articles, books, reports from international institutes, NGO reports, newspaper articles, and different websites, to generate data.

IV. FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

This paper explains the root causes and effects of Sudan's current state of civil war through the unique conflict analysis tool called the *Conflict Wheel Model (CWM)*, as well as explores prevailing historical, cultural, and socioeconomic dynamics influencing the continuation of the conflict, followed by proposing a few transformative points toward peace. The logic behind preferring the CWM model stems from a line of thought suggesting that conflicts are neither spontaneous nor exclusive to a single denominator; rather, they result from interactions between competing actors vying for control over shared resources or power domination. Based on this approach, the following data analysis section will be divided into six parts, identifying-

1. Key actors of the conflict
2. Issues of the conflict
3. Dynamics of the conflict
4. Contexts/Structures
5. Causation
6. Options/Strategies of exit

A. Key Actors of Sudan Civil War

In any type of conflict, people are central to conflict analysis. This study uses the term “actors” to refer to the involved warring parties, states, and organizations that contribute to the conflict, directly or indirectly, in both positive and negative ways.

According to a 2025 Council on Foreign Relations report, the long-held dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir faced a serious coup in April 2019, jointly carried out by Sudan's army chief, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), and the leader of the most powerful paramilitary group, the Rapid Support Force (RSF), Mohamed Hamdan “Hemedti” Dagalo. It is important to note that the RSF mainly evolved from an Arab-majority armed group known as the Janjaweed militia and was patronized by Bashir during his regime to suppress uprisings, fight in the Darfur war, and commit other serious crimes. Before the coup attempt, Bashir had hired the RSF to protect him from assassination attempts, but ultimately the RSF joined forces with the SAF in the coup to oust the Bashir government (Civil War, 2025). However, disputes over power-sharing later sparked a breach in the coalition between the two, leading to the outbreak of a full-fledged war in Khartoum in April 2023.

Besides these two rivals, former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok is also present in this scenario as the head of an internal political coalition known as Taqadam (Makour, 2024). Therefore, according to the *Conflict Wheel Model*, the SAF and RSF are the two main “conflicting parties/actors,” while former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok can be considered a “secondary actor” representing Sudanese civil sectors in the ongoing civil war. Meanwhile, the involvement of neighboring countries and international actors, driven by their respective strategic interests in the war, has exacerbated the already non-negotiable situation. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Russia are among the most significant foreign “stakeholders,” while neighboring countries such as Chad, Libya, and Eritrea can be termed “opportunists and spoilers,” as they fuel animosity in hopes of exploitation (Musso, 2025). Needless to mention, regional rivalry, the pursuit of hegemonic ambitions, and international inertia lie at the heart of this protracted crisis. The “victims/affected population” are those who hold no decision-making power in the conflict but suffer its perilous consequences. Ethnic groups, women, children, civilians, and internally displaced persons fall within this category.

B. Issues of the Conflict

With emphasis, issues can be summed up as the bones of contention or disagreements that lead to conflicting group relations. With various issues shaping the civil war in Sudan, the focus should not only be on hostile behaviors but also on prejudiced attitudes and incompatible interests. The crucial points of contention identified in Sudan's case are-

1. A Failed Political Transition: Sudan's transitional itinerary began when mass protests, deeply rooted in decades of repression, persecution, and political and economic grievances, finally succeeded in ousting Bashir's autocratic rule in 2019, in the hope of building lasting peace through democratization. It was a symbolic moment for Sudan, as the door to a more promising era opened with its removal from the global list of “state sponsors of terrorism” and the restoration of multiple international allies (Nada, 2012). However, protesters demanded the transfer of power to a civilian apparatus, questioning the legitimacy of the military council that took power after the coup. In June 2019, the “Khartoum massacre” took place, during which security forces attacked and killed over 100 pro-democracy protesters, leading to negotiations initiated by the African Union, Ethiopia, and the United States. The outcome was the establishment of a joint civilian–military transitional government for a 39-month period to prepare Sudan for national elections and future civilian rule. Under this new constitutional arrangement, the Military Sovereignty Council was led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the SAF, with Hemedti of the RSF serving as his deputy, while Abdalla Hamdok, an economist and development expert, was appointed Prime Minister from the civilian bloc (Woldemariam, 2025). It is important to note that Omar al-Bashir was overthrown by these two figures, who were previously part of his own security apparatus. As chief of the

ground forces, Burhan was involved in atrocities during state-operated military persecution against non-Muslim civilians in the 2003 Darfur war (Sudan Country, 2023). Similarly, the Bashir-funded paramilitary group RSF, led by Hemedti, was employed to suppress South Sudanese rebels and committed severe human rights crimes, including kidnapping and sexual violence, in the Darfur region (Civil War, 2025).

Alongside Hamdok's efforts to reform Sudan's economic and political crisis, which faced resistance from the military, escalating inflation and the revival of violence in Darfur reflected a renewed breach in national unity during this period. Soon afterward, in October 2021, both the SAF and RSF launched a coup against Hamdok, seizing power by dissolving the constitution and arresting civilian leaders. However, in the following November, Hamdok was reinstated as Prime Minister amid heavy mass protests by civilians. This arrangement proved short-lived due to factors such as the granting of increased constitutional power to the military, and Hamdok ultimately resigned from his post, which indirectly made General Burhan the de facto head of the state (Civil War, 2025).

2. Race for Dominance Between SAF and RSF: Eventually, after the fall of dictator Bashir, the power-sharing agreement never functioned properly between the military and civilian sectors, which further deteriorated the entire transition process intended to guide Sudan toward democracy. It was hoped that the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement, along with the 2021 Framework Agreement, could serve as the foundation for a democratic Sudan determined to address critical issues such as transitional justice, security sector reform, and the integration of forces into the military (New Political Deal, 2022).

Meanwhile, differences arose concerning the timeline for merging the RSF paramilitary forces with the regular military. The SAF demanded that the entire integration occur within a two-year timeframe, while the RSF called for a slower merger, extending up to ten years (No Agreement, 2023). Another point of friction concerned the ranking of RSF officers after integration, as the army sought to review those ranks according to military rules and training standards, a move rejected by the RSF. Disagreements also emerged over who would serve as the army's commander-in-chief, as both sides sought to gain control over the other (The Sudanese Army, 2023).

3. Expansion of RSF's Hegemony: The rise of the Rapid Support Force (RSF) is a crucial point for understanding the current civil war. The commander of the RSF, Dagalo, emerged as a key player in Sudanese national security during the 2003 civil war against Southern Darfur rebels and in 2013 against Sudan People's Liberation Army rebels in the Nuba Mountains under Omar Bashir's patronage. In the meantime, his troops took control of artisanal gold mines in Darfur and used those resources to equip the RSF into a colossal paramilitary force of over 100,000 personnel that could threaten Sudan's official military (How Does Rivalry, 2023).

The RSF was also given formal status through legislation, making it answerable to the Sudanese army in 2017.

Dagalo's consolidation of power in Sudan's political sphere occurred in 2018, when the RSF sided with civilian protesters against autocrat Bashir, rejecting his command to suppress the uprising. In short, the RSF gained much-needed public trust by aligning with the revolution that ousted Bashir, which evidently discomfited General Burhan, who sought to centralize state authority under his control (The Sudanese Army, 2023). When the question of subordination arose during RSF integration under the transitional government, Dagalo proposed that civilian President Hamdok assume the position of "Commander-in-Chief" instead of Burhan, thereby further intensifying tensions.

C. Dynamics of the Conflict

However, this much-cherished transition was brought to a halt by a "top-down process" that replaced the old regime. On April 15, 2023, the SAF and RSF struck against each other, derailing the ongoing delicate efforts to build a democratic Sudan. For a better understanding of the dynamics involved, the entire surge of the conflict can be analyzed in three phases—the initial phase, the escalating and intensified phase, and the counter-attack phase.

1. Initial Phase (April 2023): Before the final confrontation took place in mid-April, new security measures such as blocking roads and bridges, increased military exercises, and rising tension between SAF and RSF soldiers had already forecast an upcoming confrontation. Even under the façade of unity, the rift between Al-Burhan and Hemedti remained visible, as both sought to invoke support for themselves through recent diplomatic missions to neighboring countries. Initially, clashes began in the capital, Khartoum, in an effort to seize control, and it is recorded that around 70% of political violence occurred in Khartoum as the epicenter of violence between the SAF and RSF following the morning of April 15, 2023 (Serwat & Kazemi, 2023). On the same day the war began, the RSF successfully seized key locations such as the Presidential Palace and Khartoum International Airport. Issuing a decree dismissing his deputy, Hemedti, the army chief and chairman of the Sudanese Transitional Sovereign Council appointed the leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement–North, Malik Agar, in his place. A seven-day ceasefire, the "Jeddah Agreement," initiated in May by Saudi Arabia and the United States, failed as neither of the conflicting parties adhered to the agreement (Timeline, 2025). The SAF was observed to rely heavily on airstrikes and shelling against RSF bases, whereas the RSF depended on guerrilla and ground tactics. Many civilians, as well as civil society actors and journalists, were targeted by both sides, alongside grave incidents of sexual and gender-based violence. Gradually, violence spread and remained concentrated mostly in urban areas, with the highest levels of fighting occurring in the cities of Omdurman, Bahri, Nyala, El Geneina, El Obeid, and El Fasher, in addition to Khartoum. Widespread recruitment from local armed groups

by both sides has occurred, with competition over control of resources and strategic locations. By the end of 2023, the RSF had made rapid territorial gains across much of Khartoum, the Darfur region in western Sudan, and the strategically important trade-route city of Wad Madani, forcing the SAF to retreat (Nicholson, 2025).

2. Escalating and Intensified Phase (2024): As the conflict progressed, the RSF gained substantial advantages in territorial control, occupying the capital city of Khartoum as well as other vital cities and strategic locations. The high point of the Sudanese civil war occurred in 2024, when the conflict spread widely across different cities, causing major civilian casualties, most of which occurred in Khartoum and Northern Darfur. The rainy season in Sudan somewhat limited troop movement, resulting in a temporary stalemate. Meanwhile, the SAF began to mobilize more troops, aligned with local armed groups such as the Darfur Joint Forces, trained them, and opened multiple frontlines for strategic offensive operations against the RSF, thereby completely altering the dynamics of the conflict. The SAF also reportedly received 15 fighter jets from Russia and Egypt. A United Nations Security Council resolution calling for an “immediate ceasefire,” passed in March 2024, was effectively undermined when the SAF made several advances during this period (Civil War, 2025).

By adopting a more aggressive approach through large-scale military operations involving ground, air, and naval forces, the intensified phase of the conflict began in September 2024. The RSF was pushed into defensive positions amid heavy clashes, marking major territorial losses in western Khartoum, northern Bahri, Darfur, El Fasher, and Sennar. However, the SAF failed to gain control of the Corps bases and the al-Gaili oil refinery in northern Bahri, which serves as a crucial fuel source for RSF troops. Additionally, the defection of RSF commander Abu Keikal of Gezira State to the Sudanese army resulted in rampant RSF retaliation in Gezira, killing around 500 people and displacing approximately one million in October (Sudan Timeline, 2025). Continued negotiation efforts led by the United States made no progress due to the unwillingness of the conflicting parties to compromise (Turning the Tide, 2024).

3. Counter-Attack Phase (2025): The war entered its third year in 2025, with no sign of a peace agreement and a growing number of reports documenting ethnically motivated killings, detention, torture, rape, targeted killings in hospitals and mosques, and summary executions (A War of Atrocities, 2025). As a result, both the RSF commander, Dagalo, and the Sudanese army chief, Burhan, have faced sanctions from the United States for accountability in committing genocide, displacement, and violence. At this point, the SAF has successfully recaptured vital locations from RSF occupation, including the Al-Jaili oil refinery, the Presidential Palace, the headquarters of the Sudan Central Bank, several federal ministries, and Khartoum International Airport, leaving the RSF cornered within western and southern Omdurman (Sudan Timeline, 2025). This

development prompted the RSF to plan the establishment of a parallel government to the de facto Sudanese Transitional Government, even signing a new constitution in the hope of gaining diplomatic legitimacy. Although Hemedti announced himself as the President of the “Peace Government” on August 31, 2025, no country or regional organization has recognized its legitimacy. The SAF also filed a complaint against the UAE at the International Court of Justice for allegedly providing arms support to the RSF in acts of genocide (Civil War, 2025). These momentous shifts in the balance of power between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary group are likely to alter the course of the conflict in the near future.

4. Humanitarian Collapse and Economic Loss: Embroiled in an intense armed conflict, Sudan is now left with severe economic contraction, worsening poverty, unemployment, and displacement. According to the International Organization for Migration, around 15 million people have been displaced, with nearly 30,000 lives lost since the war began (Sudan Timeline, 2025). Famine, water shortages, harvest failure, cash scarcity, unemployment, inflation, and the collapse of the health system are among the outcomes of three years of civil war, in which innocent civilians continue to suffer relentlessly. Two years of war have severely decimated Sudan’s healthcare system and vital infrastructure, allowing infectious diseases to become rampant (Burki, 2025).

According to a UN Population Fund report, around 4 million Sudanese women are currently at risk of sexual violence and exploitation. Thousands of pregnant women are deprived of the bare minimum of maternal services due to the seizure and destruction of hospitals in Khartoum and other conflict-affected areas. It is also alarming that more than 80% of women face serious obstetric risks, as female genital mutilation and cutting have drastically increased in recent times (Bonavina, 2024). The war has also prompted significant environmental risks, with hazardous damage occurring at industrial plants, oil refineries, and power stations, leading to inhalation exposure risks for the population. National vegetation loss and deforestation are straining vulnerable ecosystems, and the over-mining of gold, which finances the prolonged conflict, cannot be overlooked. This valuable resource is one of the key elements shaping the actions of external actors in the conflict (Moreland, 2025).

The World Food Programme has confirmed the spread of malnutrition among children, which could have life-threatening impacts on Sudan in the long run (Figure 2). It is high time to ensure global and reproductive health protection so that basic human rights are safeguarded even during wartime in Sudan (Sudan Timeline, 2025). According to IFPRI’s *Social Accounting Matrix Multiplier Model*, Sudan’s GDP is expected to shrink by 42%, one-third of the agri-food system will be lost, and 4.6 million people are projected to become jobless in 2025 (Saddig, 2025). Both parties have committed serious human rights violations by looting and

restricting relief supplies, preventing them from reaching civilians as a war strategy, while hatred and hunger continue to fuel the conflict. Both sides have been accused by human rights groups of weaponizing food (Nashed, 2025). Additionally, it is undeniable that the ongoing Sudanese civil war poses significant risks to regional stability, leading to humanitarian disasters and economic challenges for neighboring countries facing massive refugee inflows that strain national security and economic policies (Estifanos,

2025). Deep concern has been repeatedly expressed by the United Nations, the African Union Commission, and the United States, all of which have called for strict legal action against those committing war crimes. The United States also issued an order halting all foreign assistance and aid support to Sudan in January (Tamirisa, 2025). Yet, neither party has wavered from its determination to achieve “victory” over the other.

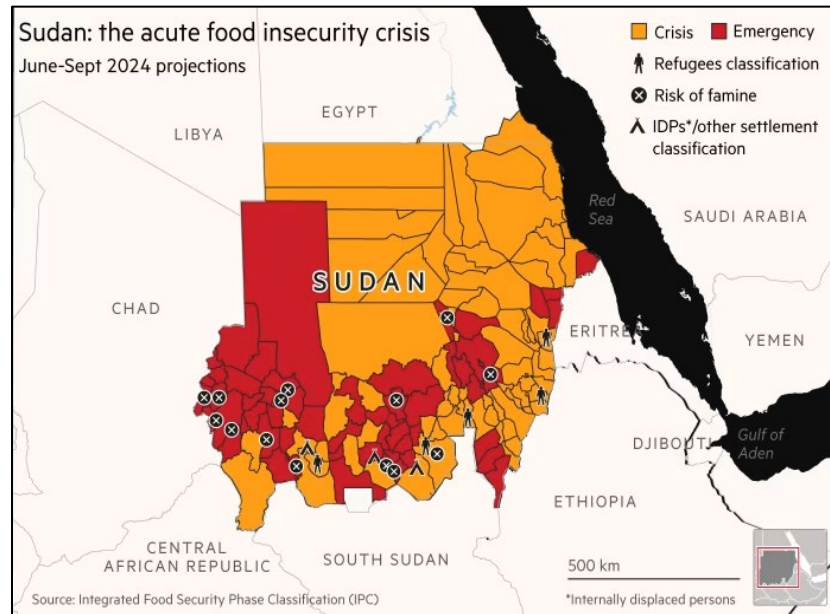


Fig.2 A Pictorial View of Ongoing Food Crisis in Sudan (Schipani, 2024)

D. Context/Structures

In abstract terms, context denotes the situation or circumstances within which a phenomenon exists, which helps us understand or explain that phenomenon. In this instance, context is used to explain the underlying historical, structural, religious, and cultural conditions that are sustaining the violent conflict between the Sudanese army and its paramilitary group.

1. Tradition of ‘Alliance Making-Division’ and Distrust: Sudan’s political arena has a long history marked by the prevalence of various political factions and armed groups, each carrying different agendas and interests. Besides the two most powerful military groups at present—the official Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Force (RSF)—the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) is another major coalition composed of numerous political and Sudanese armed factions, such as the Sudanese Professionals Association, Sudan Revolutionary Front, No to Oppression Against Women Initiative, Sudan Call, MANSAM, Sudanese resistance committees, National Consensus Forces, and the Unionist Association, among others. These groups formed a united front out of dire necessity during the movement against the Bashir regime (Forces, n.d.). However, this uneasy alliance has never been static in Sudan due to deeply rooted distrust and tension. This

is the primary reason why, even after Bashir’s successful ouster, the coalition could not reach an agreement on a civilian–military power-sharing transitional government. Although the shared goal of removing Bashir’s autocratic rule brought these groups together under one umbrella, it ultimately failed to break the persistent chain of distrust among them. For many armed groups, the movement was also a struggle against Sudan’s elite “riverine” group, which had perpetuated a colonial legacy of discrimination over decades (Key Actors, 2023).

This pattern of alliance formation and division has now become a common characteristic of Sudanese armed and political groups, where the promotion of civilian members to higher administrative positions is often perceived as a threat by other armed factions. Even the granting of extensive political power to the army during the transitional period was strongly opposed by many civilian and armed groups in Sudan.

2. Legacy of Coups D’état and Military Rule: Often referred to as a “laboratory of coups,” Sudan has undergone almost thirty-five coup d’état attempts from its independence until now (Ayferam, 2023). This recurring tendency of coups led by military governments has become an unwritten norm in Sudan, acting as a barrier to the Sudanese aspiration for a democratic country. Rather than an inclusive electoral

system, the acquisition of state power through force has become a political legacy. Thus, among the many complex factors sustaining this pattern of regime change, Sudan's militarized governance system lies at the root. This is because the Sudanese military has been entrusted with unrestricted power over the state apparatus, enabling it to accumulate immense monetary power by positioning itself in key economic sectors. Over the years, nearly 80% of state resources—such as defense, gold and rubber mines, transport, banking, and construction—have come under the control of military and paramilitary groups (Serwat & Kazemi, 2023). The ongoing civil war is no exception, as both rival parties aim to capture control over the state apparatus. It would not be an understatement to say that both SAF and RSF have successfully leveraged public mass movements to overthrow the ruling elite in pursuit of their own interests.

3. Ethnic Politicization Through 'Divide and Rule': In Sudan, the country has long harbored a fervent seed of indomitable internal division between the more developed and wealthier northern region and the peripheral southern region. Since the colonial period, Sudan has been shaped by complex cultural, religious, and African traditions, where peaceful coexistence existed between Arab Muslims and Sudanese ethnic groups. However, during the British colonial period, through processes of educational development and urbanization, the Anglo-Egyptian administration succeeded in maintaining the north of Sudan as a core Arab identity, unlike the south, which consisted largely of African, non-Arab, non-Muslim, and Christian populations. The “polarization” strategy was later maximized by the national elites of the newly independent Sudan, who concentrated resources, wealth, and power in the central region consisting of the capital Khartoum, the northern provinces, and riverbank areas, while depriving other parts of the country (Musa, 2022). During the thirty years of Al-Bashir's Islamist rule, monopolization and a false sense of superiority promoted by the “elite riverine group” further intensified ethnic polarization and social stratification. Long-standing deprivation, marginalization, and injustice are the root causes of why Sudan has been war-ridden since its birth. Historically, during the previous two civil wars, state actors used hate speech and disinformation as weapons of ethnic cleansing, intentionally escalating ethnic tensions into violence and mistrust among communities (Hate Speech, 2025).

4. Economic Downfall and Grievance: Sudan was once called the potential “breadbasket of the world” by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) during the 1980s, as it held ample prospects for development through Arab oil-generated revenue invested in agriculture, vast arable land, and industrial advancement. However, the reality was completely opposite. Only 20 million feddans of cultivable land were under cultivation out of Sudan's 200 million feddans; major development projects were shelved, food aid became necessary, and imports reached three times the value of exports. With the onset of severe drought and the hosting of nearly one million refugees from neighboring countries

such as Chad, Ethiopia, and Uganda, Sudan's economy experienced a severe crisis during that period (Niblock, 1985).

On top of this, being designated a sponsor of terrorism, Sudan suffered serious economic sanctions from the United States beginning in 1997, which later hardened into a comprehensive trade embargo. These sanctions, imposed following the ICC's genocide charges against Bashir, were only recently lifted in 2017 (Morland, 2017). Aside from sanctions, Sudan suffered multiple economic shocks after the secession of South Sudan in 2011, as it lost 95% of its exports and nearly half of its national revenue derived from oil resources. Combined with rising prices, inflation, low GDP growth, devaluation of the Sudanese pound, and wheat shortages caused by the Ukraine war, Sudan's economy was already severely weakened. The continuation of the civil war has devastated it further, and recovery may take years (The World Bank, 2025). Extreme food insecurity has left 18 million Sudanese people in acute hunger, according to the World Food Programme's 2023 report. With famine as a by-product of war and humanitarian aid denied access to areas in need of food and emergency relief, both SAF and RSF have been using “hunger” as a weapon of war, turning people against one another for survival (Keen, 2024).

E. Causation

Besides the visible factors contributing to the continuation of the conflict, there are also a few catalysts that remain outside the immediate scenario but exert an equal degree of influence on the course of events, collectively termed as “causation.” These are discussed below:

1. Sudan's Strategic Geopolitical Location and Natural Resources: Sudan, lying at the critical nexus of the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, facing the Red Sea, controlling the Nile River flow, and sharing borders with seven neighboring countries, is one of the prime reasons behind its position at the center of international attention and engagement. These seven bordering countries are the Central African Republic, Libya, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and South Sudan. The Nile River's confluence of the White and Blue Nile meets at Sudan's capital, Khartoum, and flows all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. Sudan is home to more than 60% of the Nile River basin and serves as a crucial source of water, agricultural land, and daily sustenance for many countries (The World Bank, 2025). Egypt depends on the Nile for nearly 90% of its water supply, while Ethiopia's electricity production is also dependent on it (Tounsel, 2023). Additionally, Sudan's position along the Red Sea coast provides access to a maritime route through which nearly 10% of global trade passes, connecting Asian and European markets via the Suez Canal. Because of these strategic advantages, regional and international actors have increasingly expanded their presence in the region, vying for control and influence in pursuit of security and economic interests (Donelli, 2025). Due to its role as a vital link for water, trade, and migration, Sudan's situation can be characterized as a trans-regional conflict (Musso, 2025).

Simply put, Sudan can be described as “a battlefield of international interests and power struggles.”

On the other hand, Sudan is also a natural hub of vast mineral resources. It possesses Africa’s third-largest gold production, significant oil reserves, and produces over 80% of the world’s gum arabic, a key component used in food additives, cosmetics, and paint (Tounsel, 2023).

2. Foreign Engagement: Since the start of the civil war, the two warring parties, SAF and RSF, have secured a certain level of foreign support as well as logistical supplies. According to a report by Agence France-Presse (AFP), major international actors such as Russia, the UAE, Turkey, Egypt, Chad, Libya, Iran, and Abu Dhabi are indirectly siding with one of the warring parties in pursuit of their competing interests. The UAE, through neighboring Chad, has been accused of delivering military assistance to the RSF, as have Libya and Abu Dhabi. On the army’s side, Burhan has received backing from Egypt and Iran in terms of influence. The Russian mercenary group Wagner has been reported to have supported the RSF, although it has recently changed sides. This private military contractor has also assisted Russia in advancing its agendas in Libya and Syria (Mekour, 2024).

F. Options/Strategies

This indicator examines ways to deal with the conflict and the strategies that are used or could be used to de-escalate it. Here, another important fact is that any actions and dialogue among conflicting parties should be more nuanced, contextually relevant, and evidence-based so that durable solutions can be reached. In Sudan’s case, both warring parties share responsibility for the three-year-long engulfment of the entire country, creating the largest humanitarian crisis in the world. In the current context of the Sudanese civil war, first, the long-unaddressed divisions and disunity among Sudanese political and military actors are hindering the path to peace negotiations. Whether through international efforts such as the African Union’s mediating role or the Saudi–US-led Jeddah Talks, every initiative has faced significant setbacks due to Sudan’s unique complexities rooted in a polarized political environment and deep inequalities. Applying traditional, narrowly focused, elite-centric mediation cannot resolve the crisis at this stage of the war, as it turns a complete blind eye to the existential structural conditions driving the conflict. What the country needs now more than anything else is to break the perpetual cycles of violence, marginalization, resource disparities, and governance imbalances at the grassroots level. Knowing these facts, recalcitrant commanders like Burhan and Hemedti have exploited this fragmentation and used it as an “opportunity” to manipulate peace initiatives while continuing military atrocities and ignoring the plight of civilians (Lahrich, 2024). Similarly, international mediation efforts have also crumbled due to internal political divisions in the Yemen conflict (Weerasinghe, 2022).

Secondly, another major setback in Sudan’s case is the lack of unity among political parties and civilian-led groups,

which should be mandatory participants at the negotiation table. However, there remains doubt as to whether Sudan’s citizens will have any meaningful say in the bargaining over their country’s future. This is because none of these actors is perceived as neutral at present; some are seen as aligned with the army (SAF), and even the civilian representative coalition *Taqaddum* has been accused of siding with the RSF (Schipani, 2024). Only by fostering a strong commitment to neutrality and justice among civilian groups can Burhan and Hemedti be held accountable for their war crimes, thereby putting an end to military dictatorship. Despite presenting themselves as patrons of “democracy” in rhetoric rather than in practice, both SAF and RSF have deliberately trapped Sudanese civilians in their coercive power struggle. Hence, stronger civilian voices must be heard, as neither warring party is likely to accept any ceasefire deal without calculating its consequences.

Finally, the recent trend of intense internationalization of contemporary warfare—where states increasingly exert influence over other countries’ internal affairs while avoiding direct involvement—is becoming more pronounced. Sudan, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine are glaring examples of this phenomenon. Although such foreign involvement is not new, it is certainly obstructing and prolonging the path to peace by creating additional complexity and external influence. Supplying resources such as arms, money, and troops, supporting specific warring parties from the shadows, fostering mistrust, and altering the balance of power are some of the geopolitical dynamics wielded by international actors over the trajectory of ongoing civil wars to extend their regional hegemony. In Sudan’s case as well, foreign involvement continues to hold the strings of the conflict, which is why traditional peace-building mechanisms are failing to address it effectively. Here, the introduction of multilateral peace-building strategies capable of addressing indirect foreign involvement, hybrid warfare tactics, and decentralized networks that continue to fuel the Sudanese civil war is necessary. Without recognizing these realities of modern warfare and establishing a coordinated international framework, external actors will continue to exploit impunity while maximizing their strategic gains (Nicholson, 2025).

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study mainly shed light on the calamitous civil war in Sudan, seeking to explore the root causes and effects it has brought upon its people over the past three years. In addition, this paper uncovered various covert sources of conflict closely intertwined with Sudan’s historical, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds that have contributed to shaping the current civil war. The innovative CWM approach to conflict analysis proved highly useful in this study and also offered “inclusive peace” strategies, marking a departure from prior research on this topic. It reiterates the fact that the belligerency of the two generals has caused enormous human suffering, paralyzed Sudanese state institutions, and proliferated instability in neighboring countries in the Horn of Africa. At the outset, the study distinguished among the principal warring parties and secondary players,

stakeholders, opportunists/spoilers, and victims of the conflict, and also mapped their relational dynamics by

illustrating who supports whom directly and indirectly and who benefits from the situation, as presented in Table I.

TABLE II FINDINGS ON ‘KEY ACTORS, ISSUES, DYNAMICS’ OF SUDAN CIVIL WAR

Key Actors	Issues	Dynamics
Warring Parties: SAF, RSF	A failed political transition	Initial phase (2023): RSF successfully seized key locations in Khartoum & different cities.
Secondary actors: Hamdok, Civilian group, other armed groups	Race for dominance between SAF & RSF	Escalating & intensified phase (2024): Major civilian casualties, SAF recruiting troops and making alliances with other armed groups
Foreign Stakeholders: UAE, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Egypt.	Expansion of RSF’s hegemony	Counter-attack phase (2025):SAF recaptured vital cities by plotting ‘Strategic offensive’ operations. Burhan & Hemedti both accused of genocide.
Opportunists-Spoilers: Chad, Eritrea, Libya etc. Neighboring countries	-	Humanitarian collapse & economic loss
Victim: Civilians, women, children, ethnic groups, internally displaced etc.	-	-

As for explicit political issues, the study found that the failure of the transitional joint government, due to Army General Burhan’s self-proclamation as the “de facto” head of Sudan, strained relationships between civilian groups and other armed actors. In addition, the hegemonic rise of the RSF and the proposed merger of RSF soldiers into the official state army indirectly threatened SAF’s monopolized exercise of power, which led to the civil war. At the same time, this paper identifies major interrelated reasons rooted in historical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts that have significantly contributed to the current Sudan conflict. Power struggles have persisted since Sudan’s post-independence period, as the country has experienced almost 35 coup attempts, with the military remaining at the top of the power hierarchy, controlling state apparatuses and monetary positions. Furthermore, deep-seated ethnic divisions and polarization

among Arab, non-Muslim, and Christian groups have fueled a culture of hatred and inequality for decades. Coupled with a massive economic downturn, Sudan also became trapped in international sanctions following war crimes committed in Darfur.

The existing literature and discourse on the issue also reflect several of the factors highlighted in this paper. For example, Liyew discusses how the Sudan conflict is creating regional instability along the African–Arab border region. Keen also highlights the humanitarian crisis, illustrating how the war is exacting a grim toll on nearly half of the Sudanese population. This study further uncovers the often-overlooked negative consequences facing Sudan’s ecological system and how these impacts are harmful to human well-being as well.

TABLE III FINDINGS ON ‘CONTEXT, CAUSATION, STRATEGIES ON PEACE’

Context/Structures	Causation	Options/Strategies
Tradition of ‘Alliance making-Division’ and distrust	Sudan’s strategic geopolitical location and natural resources	Embracing grassroot level peace-building effort to address
Legacy of coups d’état and military rule	Foreign engagement	Strong civilian representation based on justice & neutrality
Ethnic politicization through ‘Divide & Rule	-	‘Multilateral Peace-building Strategies’ addressing foreign indirect involvement, hybrid warfare tactics.
Economic downfall and grievance	-	-

Using the Conflict Wheel Model of conflict analysis, the study ascertains that the visible display of a power showdown between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary group Rapid Support Forces (RSF) is not driven solely by long-standing deprivation, mismanagement of ethnic crises, and militarized monopolization within Sudan’s political realm, but also by Sudan’s geographical location and vast natural resources, which attract foreign powers and place the country on a geopolitical battlefield, as shown in Table 2. A quote from Mr. Volker Perthes, Special Representative of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan, aptly describes Sudan’s current condition: “These

are man-made, human-made catastrophes, often caused by disputes over access to resources, and seemingly exacerbated by political manipulation in more than a few cases” (New political deal, 2022). Compared with prior work, the evidence presented in the data analysis section extends current understanding of the Sudan civil war by unfolding multidimensional factors and actors and their individual interests in continuing the war. Unlike studies that primarily focus on the humanitarian crisis (Keen, 2024) or the role of international organizations in managing the conflict (Oktavia, 2024), this paper provides a comprehensive analysis of Sudan’s interconnected historical, political,

cultural, and socioeconomic sources that have nurtured its civil war environment. In short, the Sudan war increasingly resembles a political and humanitarian “black hole,” pulling defenseless populations, resources, and regional actors into a spiral of destruction. Just as nothing escapes a black hole’s gravity, Sudan risks becoming a zone where governance, humanitarian aid, and human life collapse, with little hope of recovery unless external forces—such as strong mediation mechanisms and accountability for war crimes—intervene beyond its national horizon. Finally, this study proposes three points of departure from the prevailing stalemate following SAF’s recapture of most vital contested cities from RSF control in 2025. By drafting a provisional vision for post-war governance, both perpetrators should be brought to the negotiation table. Addressing historical ethnic grievances, preserving civilian representation, decentralizing the military’s monopolization of state power, and detaching foreign strategic involvement through the development of multilateral peace-building strategies at the international level are essential steps forward.

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