

# Sudan Conflict | Regional Effects

May 1, 2023

## Summary

The fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) which broke out on April 15, 2023, can have important ramifications for Sudan’s neighbours. As of midnight on April 30, a three-day long cease fire is in place in Sudan. However, the situation remains highly volatile, and despite the ceasefire, local clashes continue to occur.

If hostilities continue, regional implications can be severe. Some of the most important results of a protracted conflict are:

- More people being displaced and seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. Already, thousands of people have crossed into Chad, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Ethiopia. Such a humanitarian crisis can further compound the existing food scarcity in the region, thereby driving social unrest and/or violent conflict.
- Cross-border movement of armed groups. The porous borders of the region, combined with links between Sudanese and external armed actors, increase the possibility of such movement. This augments the chances of the conflict spilling over to neighbouring nations.
- Regionalisation of conflict. External actor interference could result in the targeting of border regions by Sudanese belligerents. Since the fighting erupted, reports of regional actors resupplying, or offering to resupply, the warring parties have emerged.
- Deterioration of national economies. Aside from the dire humanitarian situation, the fighting could disrupt energy commodity exports, which in the case of South Sudan could have severe socioeconomic implications.



Figure 1: Map of countries most affected by Sudan conflict.  
Source: Encyclopedia Britannica

## Chad

Chad's existing struggles with food insecurity and social unrest are likely to be aggravated by the conflict in Sudan, as Sudanese violence has already spread to Chad in the past. A takeover of power in Sudan by the RSF or an RSF retreat into the Darfur region can both lead to worrying scenarios for Chad.

Regardless of the outcome of the Sudanese conflict, Chad's growing food insecurity will be impacted by the influx of refugees from Sudan. The country currently hosts 600,000 refugees in addition to 300,000 internally displaced Chadians. It is not able to provide enough food for around 90% of them. The tens of thousands of refugees that are expected to enter Chad in the coming weeks and months will put more strain on an already exhausted food supply. Rising food insecurity has the potential to fuel existing social unrest in the form of protests, while it can also facilitate recruitment by armed groups. It could also exacerbate the recent wave of abductions for ransom, which are often economically motivated.

In the scenario of an RSF loss, there is a high probability that it will retreat into Darfur. General Dagalo, the RSF's leader, was born in the border area and is known to still have a network of allies there. Some experts believe that this network could be used to recruit former Chadian rebels, inciting cross border movements and thereby destabilizing the east of Chad.

The scenario of an RSF win in Sudan could fuel tensions in Chad. This is because of the fact that many fighters in the RSF are from the Chad-Sudan border area. These close ties mean that Chadian rebels are likely to seek support in the form of weapons from the RSF in the case of a win. Sources within the Chadian government are especially worried that the Chadian Arab community may attempt to grab power in this scenario. While the exact relation between the Russian Wagner Group and RSF remains unclear, an RSF win could potentially lead to a consolidation of the group's regional position. This could in turn further threaten the stability of the Chadian government. Wagner, which supports the RSF, reportedly aids Chadian rebels in the planning of a coup.

## Central African Republic

The CAR is plagued by internal conflict with numerous armed groups operating within its territory. This instability has resulted in more than 20,000 CAR refugees currently present in Sudan. On April 28 it was reported that approximately 3,000 refugees had crossed the Sudanese border into the CAR. There appear to be established links between the RSF and both CAR armed groups, as well as the Russian Wagner Group, which operates in the African country since 2018. Since the fighting in Sudan erupted on April 15, reports have alleged that Wagner has offered the RSF anti-aircraft weaponry from its own stockpiles in the CAR, but its leader, General Mohamed Dagalo had refused. In January 2023, General Dagalo claimed that the RSF had thwarted a coup attempt against the CAR government by Central African rebels operating in Sudanese territory. On January 6, the CAR and Sudan agreed to close their shared border to prevent armed groups from crossing over. Other sources reported that during January, the RSF were involved in counterinsurgency operations within the CAR alongside government forces and Wagner personnel. In 2019, reports indicated that elements of the RSF were selling arms to factions of the Popular Front for the Rebirth of CAR (FPRC) and Union for Peace in CAR (UPC) rebel groups in the Sudanese region of Darfur.

A prolonged conflict in Sudan would enhance the chances of arms being transferred from the CAR to Sudan in support of the RSF. This would make CAR territories a potential target of the SAF air force in order to disrupt such deliveries. In addition, a preoccupied RSF would potentially create a security vacuum in the region of Darfur, adjacent to the CAR. This could make Darfur a safe haven for rebel groups launching attacks within CAR's territory. On the other hand, if the RSF is defeated and forced to disperse, then many of its elements could find refuge in the CAR. The region of Vakaga, next to the Sudanese border, is already a hotbed of rebel activity. A potential RSF entrenchment would further deteriorate the already complex security landscape of the region. Finally, if fighting in Sudan continues, it is almost certain that the number of refugees crossing into the CAR will sharply increase.

## South Sudan

South Sudan is stuck in a dangerous cycle of conflict and hunger, making it highly susceptible to the destabilising effects of the ongoing conflict in Sudan.

The scarcity of food is a primary driver of intercommunal disputes, with local tribes fighting over farmland and cattle. The widespread availability of small arms has turned these conflicts into deadly battles. Such localised disputes have also led to nationwide discord in the past. Food insecurity is expected to worsen in 2023, and the potential arrival of tens of thousands of refugees could exacerbate this problem. Moreover, the ongoing conflict in Sudan may hinder South Sudan's ability to export its most important commodity: oil. South Sudan relies on raw materials from Sudan for its oil production, but imports have ceased. The South Sudanese Minister of Petroleum has stated that they will run out of these materials within three months. Without alternative sources, oil production may stop, causing the economy to crumble and potentially leading to a civil war. The latter has occurred in the past, as the cessation of oil production and a subsequent economic collapse in 2013 were important causes of the 2013-2020 civil war.

Lastly, the extreme factionalism in South Sudan's national politics aggravates the above-mentioned causes of conflict. Governmental infighting and combat with armed groups throughout the country are constantly brewing. The close ties between Sudan and South Sudan have the potential to destabilize relations further, as seen by the formation of a new rebel alliance, the South Sudan Federal Democratic Alliance (SSFDA), in Khartoum, Sudan. The conflict in Sudan could also allow armed factions to cross more easily into South Sudan.

## Ethiopia

Ethiopia's relations with Sudan have been overshadowed by long-standing issues. As a downstream nation, Sudan feels threatened by the potentially negative repercussions of Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam's (GERD) operations for its economy and development. Sovereignty over the fertile region of Al-Fashaga has also been a point of tension. In late 2020, the SAF took advantage of the war in Tigray and forcefully occupied this disputed border province. Ever since, sporadic skirmishes between Sudanese and Ethiopian forces have taken place. On April 19, 2023, a pro-SAF news outlet claimed that the army successfully thwarted a large-scale Ethiopian attempt to invade Al-Fashaga. While Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed refuted the claim, there have been voices in Ethiopia, mainly Amharas, who have demanded the return of what they perceive as historically Ethiopian lands. Furthermore, there have been allegations of Sudan materially supporting Tigrayan forces since late 2020, as well as rebels originating from the Benishangul-Gumuz region of Ethiopia. Reports of Tigrayan and Gumuz armed factions being harboured by the SAF in Sudan's Gedaref and Blue Nile states have also surfaced. Recent high-level diplomatic engagement between the two countries has eased these tensions. However, the possibility of a future deterioration in relations remains.

Since the start of the fighting in Sudan, approximately 4.700 refugees have crossed into Ethiopia through the border town of Metema Yohannes. It is highly likely that renewed clashes in Sudan will result in more refugees entering Ethiopia, at a time when humanitarian resources are already strained due to the post-war situation in Tigray. In addition, a prolonged period of instability in which the SAF is preoccupied with internal conflict could be interpreted as an opportunity by Amharan actors. Although an attempt by federal Ethiopian forces to occupy Al-Fashaga is unlikely, Amharan regional forces and militias could become more assertive in their demands, sparking renewed border clashes in the process. Given the large SAF presence in Al-Fashaga, it is highly likely that such an escalation would result in shelling and incursions into Ethiopian border areas. Finally, if tensions between the SAF and Amharan factions escalate, renewed SAF support for Tigrayan and Gumuz rebel activities within Ethiopia is likely. While the Ethiopian federal government has signed separate peace deals with Gumuz and Tigrayan rebels in October and November 2022 respectively, ethnic tensions between these actors and Amharan armed groups remain a driver of conflict in Ethiopia.

## Advice from Forth Global

- Make sure all employees traveling to the region undertake a three-day HEAT training prior to deployment.
- Monitor local news and liaise with local contacts to be informed of relevant developments.
- Avoid all unnecessary travel to areas bordering Sudan. If travel is necessary, advise staff to check the state of the roads in advance and consider traveling with security detail in convoy.
- Test crisis response plans and evacuation procedures. Ensure emergency response plans are updated and appropriately distributed to workers on the ground.

## Customized advice

Please contact us for specific advice:

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