

The UAE's Role in the Sudanese Civil War

by Hilal Khashan - November 10, 2025

Sudan is an unviable country because it is home to 570 tribes, 57 ethnic groups and nearly 60 separatist movements. Immediately after its independence in 1956, the southern part of the country took up arms against the government in Khartoum to protest economic deprivation, gross political underrepresentation and the official policy of proselytizing the south to Islam. Amid ethnic and religious conflict throughout the country, South Sudan won its independence in 2011.

Years before that, an armed conflict broke out between Arab nomadic Bedouins and settled African tribes in Darfur, the western Sudanese region that straddles the borders of Libya and Chad. The rebellion was due to racist policies pursued by former President Omar al-Bashir against non-Arab tribes. The Sudanese army suffered heavy defeats, and the government found itself in a precarious strategic position, especially after its defeat in el-Fasher, the capital of North Darfur. Al-Bashir responded by arming local Arab militias of Bedouins and herders, later known as the Janjaweed, to support the army in confronting the rebels who demanded expanded federalism. The Janjaweed would later become the primary instrument in the United Arab Emirates' ruinous plan to dominate Sudan.

In 2003, conflict resumed as the Sudan Liberation Movement and the Justice and Equality Movement took up arms against the government in Khartoum, protesting what they considered the systematic marginalization of Darfur and demanding a fair distribution of political power and national wealth. The Sudanese government responded with a large-scale military campaign that relied heavily on the Janjaweed. Khartoum gave its constituent carte blanche to target villages harboring rebels.

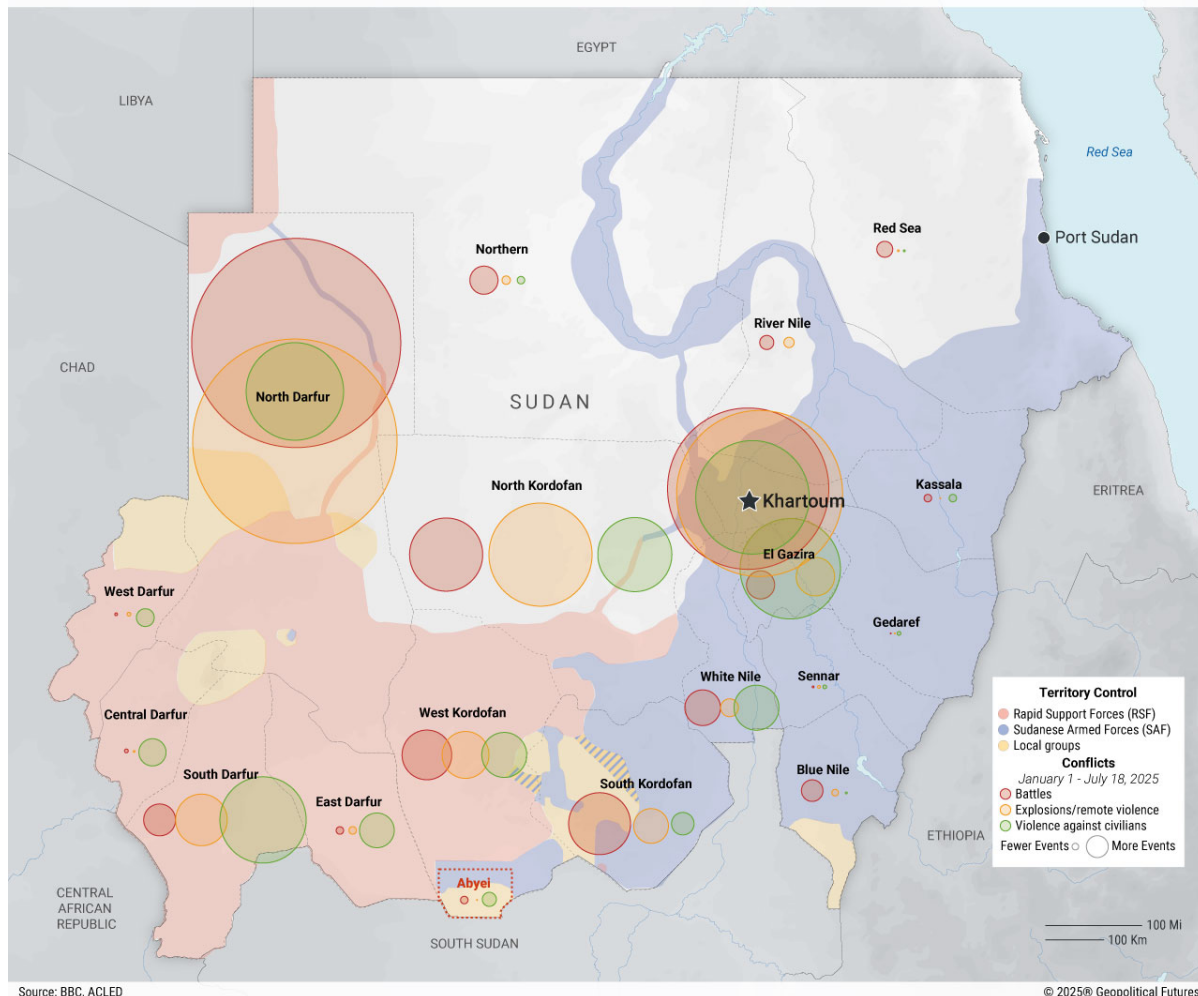
It's no secret that from the beginning, the Janjaweed committed atrocities against African civilians: mass killings, widespread rape and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents. During the war, the Janjaweed seized the gold-rich region known as Jebel Amer, thus giving former leader Musa Hilal financial independence and growing influence. In 2013, al-Bashir transformed the Janjaweed into a regular force called the Rapid Support Forces and gave control of the group to a former camel shepherd, Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, better known as Hemedti.

The problem was that the RSF remained loyal to Hemedti, not al-Bashir, so what had once been a political tool became a well-equipped military independently funded from gold smuggling. It thus

began to exert broad influence throughout the Sudanese state. Hemedti became the wealthiest man in Sudan, forming an alliance with his biggest export partner: the UAE. Hemedti has since secured power in exchange for implementing Emirati policy aimed at expanding UAE influence in Africa via Sudan.

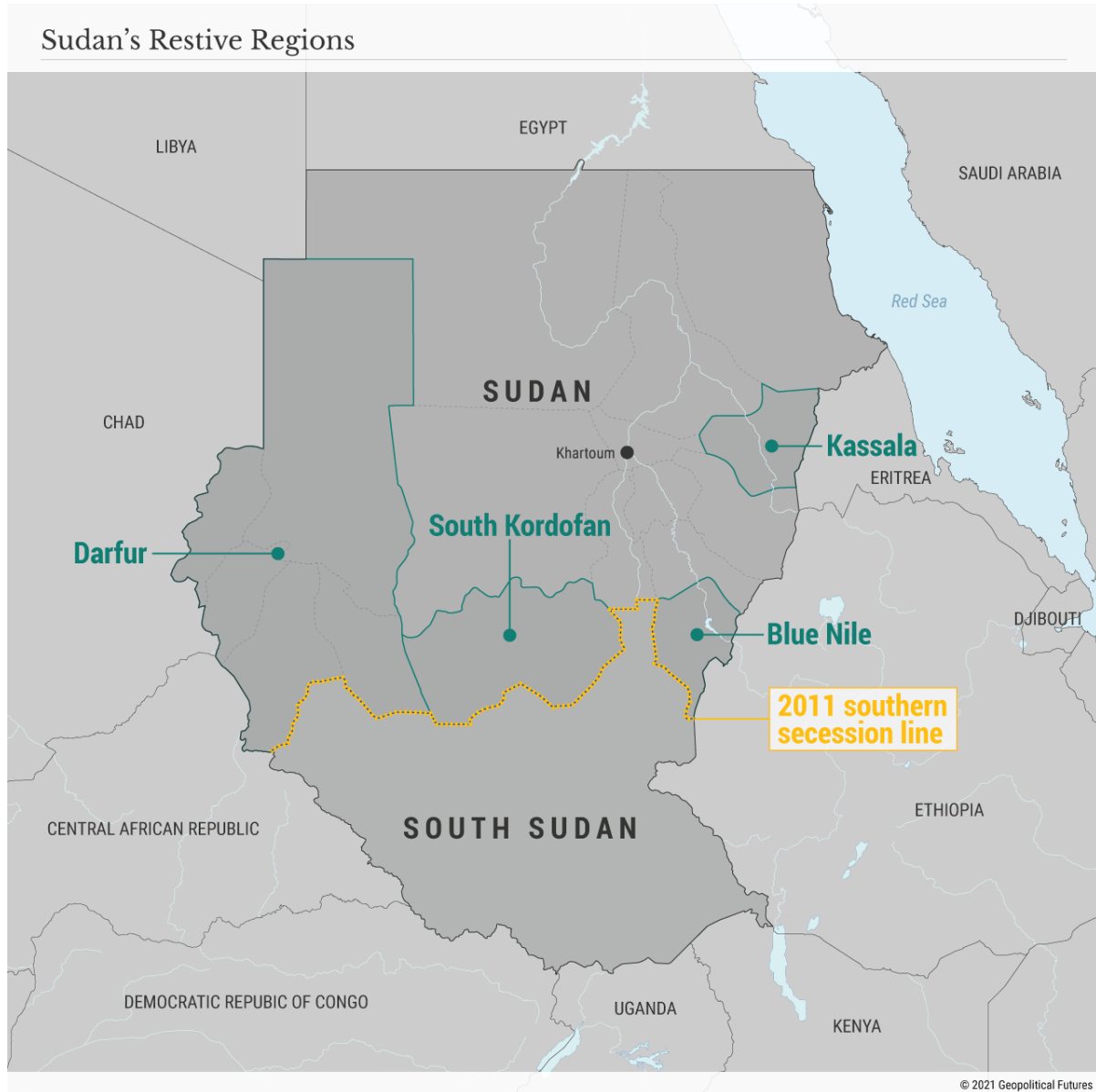
The RSF's watershed moment came in 2015. Some of its units participated in the Saudi-led military coalition in Yemen, and in return for its services, it received generous funding from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, which strengthened its political, military and economic position within Sudan. The Sudanese military soon grew suspicious of the RSF's power. In 2019, Hemedti became the vice president of the Transitional Sovereignty Council, the ad hoc government after al-Bashir was ousted from power. The other vice president was Army Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. The two formed an uneasy alliance for the sake of stability, but tensions rose over negotiations to move to civilian rule and subsume the RSF under the banner of the state military. These disagreements gradually evolved into a civil war that continues today.

Territorial Control in Sudan, July 2025



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

The war has set Sudan on the path to partition. Already it's de facto divided into four regions, but it will almost certainly break down further. Indeed, the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement stipulated the division of Sudan into three semi-independent states – Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile – in addition to the states controlled by the central Khartoum government in the north, center and east. The plan was overseen by the UAE and ultimately floundered.



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Since the Arab Spring, the UAE has waged a counter-revolutionary campaign across the Arab world, funding coups, arming militias and fueling proxy wars to halt democratic transition and preserve authoritarian regimes. Its foreign policy is based on preemptive sabotage to thwart uprisings and prevent the spread of democracy. That the UAE supports the RSF is undeniable; the Sudanese army found UAE-made armored personnel carriers equipped with British engines in the fighting areas of Khartoum. (This is a violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions, and it raises questions about British complicity in the conflict or laxity in implementing U.N. resolutions.) Emirati weapons flow to

the RSF from Chad and the eastern regions of Libya controlled by Gen. Khalifa Haftar – as do mercenaries, advanced Chinese-made drones, light weapons, heavy machine guns, APCs, field artillery and mortar rounds.

The war in Sudan is one of the bloodiest conflicts in Africa. And it is no longer merely an internal conflict; it has become an open arena for foreign intervention. This support points to complex regional alliances that undermine efforts to end the war, fuel violence against civilians and pave the way for the fragmentation of Sudan. That Hemedti presented himself as the sworn enemy of Islamist-leaning forces aligned him closely with the policies of the UAE, which actively seeks to curb the influence of Islamists in all Arab countries.

Last March, the Sudanese army, with the help of the Muslim Brotherhood, seized control of Khartoum and expelled the RSF, provoking the ire of the UAE. Muslim Brotherhood fighters made no secret of their ambition to resurrect the caliphate from Khartoum. Just two days after his forces recaptured Khartoum, al-Burhan traveled to Saudi Arabia to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The visit highlighted the deep rift between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over influence in the Red Sea region. Instability along the Red Sea poses a direct threat to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and NEOM project, as well as its efforts to expand the Yanbu terminal, which aims to diversify oil export routes away from the Strait of Hormuz. Such disruptions also threaten to undermine Saudi Arabia's vital investments in Sudan's food security, where large agricultural projects have become a cornerstone of bilateral relations.

Emirati leader Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan has already invested in 193 square miles (500 square kilometers) of agricultural land in Sudan and has future projects planned to invest in an additional 620 square miles to enhance the UAE's food security. An infrastructure project intends to link those areas to the Abu Amama port, which lies north of Port Sudan and which the UAE built for \$6 billion. The farm project gives 35 percent of its revenue to the Sudanese government in exchange for Abu Dhabi's complete control over the enterprise. After the 2021 coup, al-Burhan refused to give the guarantees requested by the UAE, arguing that the agreement did not do justice to Sudan. Al-Burhan's rejection led MBZ to expand his support for Hemedti to unravel the Sudanese state.

Control of Darfur gives the UAE a route to expand into Chad and Central Africa, which are rich in uranium, gold and rare minerals, as well as fertile agricultural land. Several influential local, regional and international actors have intervened in the Sudanese civil war, where Turkey, Qatar, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Russia back the regular army, while the UAE, Kenya and Chad support the RSF. Notably, the countries supporting the Sudanese army disagree on a number of regional issues,

but they have a shared interest in curbing the UAE's rapidly growing influence in Yemen, the Horn of Africa, Sudan and other parts of the continent. It's no exaggeration to say many in the Middle East and Africa view the UAE as a harbinger of doom wherever it goes.

As part of its efforts to diversify its economy away from oil, the UAE is also seeking to acquire a major copper mine in Zambia, a move that illustrates Abu Dhabi's broader strategy to control African resources. The UAE recognizes the importance of Sudan's natural resources, particularly its approximately 625,000 square miles of arable land and its significant gold, silver and mineral resources. Sudan also enjoys a strategically important location, situated in the Nile Valley, the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region.

In essence, the UAE wants to dominate food security in the Middle East and Africa, which requires tightening its grip on every port along the Red Sea coast. It aspires to build a maritime network that surpasses that of the Omani Empire, which flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries and stretched from southern and eastern Arabia, the Persian coast and parts of the Indian coast to East Africa. The UAE's ambition to control Sudan's fertile lands and vast mineral resources has compelled its involvement in a bloody war and efforts to effectively dissolve Sudan as state. This will go a long way in helping it to reshape Africa more broadly.

Abu Dhabi has transformed from a gentle, quiet and tolerant emirate under Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan into what some call Little Sparta under MBZ, whose policies are marked by imperial ambitions. In recognition of the role Sudanese expatriates played in the development of Abu Dhabi, Al Nahyan used to say he wanted to make Abu Dhabi like Khartoum, in appreciation of the city's beauty and architecture. But his son has left Khartoum in ruins.

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