STUDY NOTES · BASIC CONCEPT

Why is Sudan facing a civil war? Background and history

International Relations

26 Jan 2027

Background

Sudan's history is marked by deep-seated divisions along ethnic, religious, regional, and resource lines, stemming from its colonial past under British-Egyptian rule (known as the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium) until independence in 1956.

The country has experienced multiple civil wars, primarily driven by tensions between the wealthier, Arab-Muslim dominated north and the more diverse, often marginalized south and peripheral regions like Darfur. These conflicts have involved issues of identity (Arab vs. non-Arab, Muslim vs. Christian/animist), resource control (e.g., Nile water, oil), and political power.

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First Sudanese Civil War (1955–1972)

The war erupted just before independence, as southern Sudanese—predominantly Christian and animist—rebelled against northern dominance and the imposition of Arabic language, culture, and Islamic law (sharia). Southerners felt marginalized economically and politically, with promises of self-governance unfulfilled.

Southern rebels, known as the Anyanya, fought the central government. The conflict resulted in about 500,000 deaths, mostly civilians, and mass displacement. Ended with the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, granting the south limited autonomy.

Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005)

The peace unraveled when President Jaafar Nimeiri imposed sharia nationwide and revoked southern autonomy. This reignited southern grievances, exacerbated by oil discoveries in the south and resource exploitation by the north.

Led by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) under John Garang, the war involved widespread famine, atrocities, and ethnic violence. It overlapped with the Darfur conflict starting in 2003, where government-backed Janjaweed militias (Arab nomads) targeted non-Arab groups like the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa, leading to genocide accusations by the International Criminal Court. War Killed an estimated 2 million people, displaced millions, and caused massive humanitarian crises.

The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) ended the war, paving the way for a 2011 referendum where South Sudan voted for independence, becoming a separate nation.

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Lead-Up to the Current Civil War (2023–Present)

The current conflict builds on decades of instability under Omar al-Bashir's dictatorship (1989–2019), who seized power in a coup and ruled with an iron fist, enforcing strict sharia, suppressing minorities, and using militias like the Janjaweed (which evolved into the RSF) to crush rebellions in Darfur and elsewhere. Bashir's regime faced the Darfur genocide (2003 onward), killing over 300,000 and displacing millions.

2019 Revolution and Coup

Economic crises and protests in 2018–2019 led to Bashir's ouster in April 2019 via a joint coup by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary

group led by Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti). The RSF originated from the Janjaweed, known for atrocities in Darfur.

A fragile civilian-military transitional government was formed, with Burhan as head of the Transitional Sovereignty Council and Hemedti as deputy. Protests demanded full civilian rule, but tensions grew over integrating the RSF into the SAF and power-sharing.

In October 2021, Burhan and Hemedti staged another coup, dissolving the civilian government amid disagreements on democratic transition. This deepened the rift between SAF and RSF.

Outbreak and Details of the Current War

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1. The war began on April 15, 2023, when RSF forces attacked SAF positions in Khartoum and other cities, amid escalating disputes over RSF integration into the army and control of resources like gold mines in Darfur. The conflict quickly spread to Darfur, Kordofan, and beyond.
2. SAF: Regular army, backed by Egypt and Islamist elements; controls eastern Sudan and parts of Khartoum.
3. RSF: Paramilitary with about 100,000 fighters, strong in Darfur; accused of receiving support from the UAE and Chad.
4. Smaller groups: SPLM-North rebels, Darfur militias, and ethnic armed factions have aligned variably.
5. Foreign Involvement: China supplies arms to both sides; accusations of Russian Wagner Group ties to RSF (now defunct).
6. Major Events : Battle of Khartoum (2023–ongoing): Urban warfare destroyed infrastructure.
7. Darfur Atrocities: RSF accused of ethnic cleansing against non-Arabs, echoing 2003 genocide.
8. Recent: As of January 2026, SAF broke RSF sieges in areas like Dilling, but fighting continues.
9. Failed Peace Efforts: Multiple ceasefires (e.g., Jeddah talks mediated by Saudi Arabia and U.S.) have collapsed; African Union and UN initiatives stalled.
10. Humanitarian Impact and Current Status : As of January 2026, the war has killed over 150,000 people, displaced 10 million (including 2 million refugees), and caused famine affecting 25 million.
11. The health system has collapsed, with frequent attacks on civilians, sexual violence, and human rights abuses by both sides.
12. Sudan faces the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with aid access blocked.

13. The conflict shows no end, risking further regional instability in the Horn of Africa. For aid, organizations like the International Rescue Committee (IRC) provide support.

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