

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	827
Land:	Sudan
Kilde:	International Crisis Group (ICG)
Titel:	Battle for Khartoum Marks a Crossroads in Sudan's Civil War
Udgivet:	21. februar 2025
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	25. august 2025



Document #2124150

International Crisis Group

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Battle for Khartoum Marks a Crossroads in Sudan's Civil War

The Sudanese army is pushing to take over Khartoum. Should it prevail, it would record a major victory, though one that would be unlikely to end the country's devastating conflict. Mediators should keep exploring openings for peace talks.

A momentous battle now under way seems likely to open a volatile new phase in Sudan's grisly war. The Sudanese army (which leads the de facto UN-recognised government) is advancing into Khartoum, close to two years after being ousted from the capital at the start of the civil war that erupted in April 2023. The stakes are huge. If the army under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan manages to retake Khartoum, it would score a tremendous victory over its foe, the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo "Hemedti". Yet signs are that the RSF could be regrouping to slow the army's forward drive despite its collapse in surrounding areas. Whatever the outcome, the battle will likely deepen the involvement of regional powers in the war and could even spur informal partition. Mediators, whether from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Türkiye, the U.S. or elsewhere, will likely need to wait for the fighting in Khartoum to settle before calling for new peace talks. But once it does, they should push Burhan, Hemedti and outside parties to end the war, even if that prospect will probably hinge on a rapprochement between the army chief and the UAE, the RSF's main patron.

Sudan's war is one of the most [destructive](#) that the Horn of Africa has seen in years. Tens of thousands have died and millions face acute food shortages. Many millions have been uprooted from their homes. Two out of three Sudanese no longer have access to health care, according to [aid agencies](#), and most children are out of school. The war threatens stability

in neighbours including Chad and South Sudan, which have welcomed hundreds of thousands of refugees, and could further pull in regional rivals including Eritrea, which backs the army, as well as Ethiopia, viewed as more sympathetic to the RSF. Ending the war is paramount if still more suffering is to be avoided.

A Nationwide Battlefield

Conflict erupted in mid-April 2023 on the back of a struggle for supremacy between Burhan and Hemedti. The pair had seized power together in an October 2021 coup, toppling a civilian-led administration that had taken the helm after long-time ruler Omar al-Bashir was ousted in 2019 following a popular revolution. Burhan, who heads Sudan's military, ruled the country in an awkward alliance with Hemedti before the two fell into outright enmity, due partly to a dispute over efforts to form a unified army.

Hemedti's RSF has held the upper hand for much of the war. It seized most of Khartoum and its surrounding suburbs early on, besieging the nearby barracks of the Sudanese army. Burhan himself only escaped from army headquarters in Khartoum months later, decamping with the rest of his government to Port Sudan on the Red Sea, in Sudan's far east. Later in 2023, the RSF proceeded to conquer most of Darfur in Sudan's west, the homeland of many of its troops, and took much of Kordofan in the south. It then pressed on with a lightning strike on Wad Medani, an important city south east of Khartoum, that December, forcing hundreds of thousands of residents from their homes. The RSF captured more territory south of the capital in mid-2024, leaving the army mostly reduced to strongholds in the east and north of the country. The army, meanwhile, failed to mount a significant offensive of its own.

The RSF's advances left in their wake a trail of wanton destruction, systematic looting and atrocities. Despite its conquests, the RSF failed to establish effective administrative control in areas it annexed, especially outside Darfur, or even offer the most basic public services, leaving millions of Sudanese who had survived the offensive in dire living conditions. Aid groups also [accuse](#) its ground forces of widespread corruption and bribe-seeking, aggravating a starvation crisis that the UN considers one of the worst of the modern era, with some parts of Sudan plunging into famine. As the national leader recognised by the UN, Burhan has also vetoed aid deliveries in many places, intensifying famine-like conditions in RSF-held territories.

The army has responded to its battlefield setbacks in a number of ways. It has bombed the RSF from the air, with a view in particular to disrupting its supply lines. It has also tried to rally, arm and mobilise an array of militias to fight the RSF, in keeping with the army's historical strategy of outsourcing ground combat to affiliates. The forces now confronting the RSF include Darfuri ex-rebels, Islamists (some with ties to the ousted

Bashir regime), tribal militias and, [reportedly](#), Tigrayan fighters from neighbouring Ethiopia. In addition, community defence groups have been formed by ethnic groups that the RSF has displaced from their homelands. Yet the army seemed to be struggling to bring these militias together into a cohesive fighting force, even as the RSF appeared to be stretched thin across various fronts. By mid-2024, the conflict looked stuck in an uneasy stalemate.

The Army Strikes Back

The tide of war began turning in late 2024. New offensives launched by the army and its allies appeared better coordinated and supplied than previous efforts. The RSF's hold on Wad Medani quickly slipped away. Further setbacks came in the face of a multi-front army offensive around the capital. In late January, the RSF lost control of a critical oil refinery at Jaili, north of Khartoum. On the same day, forces allied with Burhan finally broke the siege on army headquarters – a major defeat for the RSF, which had encircled the base in the war's first days. By then, the RSF had been driven out of northern and central Omdurman, Khartoum's sister city to the west of the Nile, while the army also took large parts of Bahri to the north. The RSF is still hunkered down in the largely depopulated centre of Khartoum, where it is engaged in street battles with army units and appears to be putting up fierce resistance, slowing the army's advance.

The reasons for the RSF's collapse on the eastern front are disputed, but a number of factors seem to have played a part. First, the RSF appears to be suffering from supply challenges on the Khartoum front. Its main supply route comes via Darfur, which requires the movement of convoys over long distances through open terrain, where they are vulnerable to aerial bombardment. That route is also now dependent on a single bridge that crosses the Nile south of Khartoum. The bombing and eventual loss of the Jaili refinery, a major source of fuel, has also likely strained the RSF's mobility.

Secondly, as noted above, the RSF looks increasingly overstretched, especially as a result of the war in North Darfur, where its forces are fighting Darfuri armed groups (composed primarily of ethnic Zaghawa) now aligned with Burhan. The RSF has had to divert substantial resources and personnel to that front, which it considers indispensable given that many of its core fighters and leaders hail from the area. A third reason may be that the RSF is facing serious internal frictions, especially as the plunder of early victories dries up – and along with it the means of motivating and compensating many RSF fighters. In addition to challenges within its rank and file, the RSF has seen a number of top commanders defect in recent months. The defectors have turned their guns on their former comrades.

Lastly, the army's wider mobilisation of new militias, including the Islamist brigades, as well as its mastery of drones supplied over the course of the

past two years, have finally given it the firepower to beat back the previously dominant RSF. The RSF's hostile occupation and abusive behaviour toward civilians, particularly in the Nile valley, have cost it dearly in this respect, deeply alienating communities who have gone on to form militias to fight on the army's side.

An Uncertain Future

What happens from here is unclear. Burhan and his allies inside and outside Sudan are confident they will soon retake Khartoum, perhaps in weeks. They may well be right, especially given the speed of the RSF's retreat into the city centre from outlying areas. But the army's advances have faltered at various times throughout the course of the war, and as noted, its progress appears to have slowed as it battles the RSF street by street for the rest of Khartoum. The RSF could prove harder to dislodge in prolonged urban combat, with the army unable to resort to aerial bombardment to turn the tables in its favour.

Should Burhan manage to consolidate control of most of Khartoum, both opportunity and peril would loom. Many inhabitants of the capital and its surroundings would welcome the army's advance as a liberation given the fierce hatred they harbour for the RSF, which they view as a hostile invader and occupier. A decisive victory in Khartoum would also likely ease humanitarian conditions there, which have been especially dire.

But, even in that scenario, the risks are also evident. Retaking Khartoum would not on its own end the war or even shorten it. Burhan's government could claim victory even as fighting continues to rage elsewhere, especially in Darfur and Kordofan, which previous Sudanese governments have left to languish in turmoil for decades. Indeed, Burhan's representatives signal that they plan on continuing the war and maintain their rejection of peace talks.

Darfur, above all, is at risk of descending into ugly, protracted conflict if the RSF turns its focus to its home region. Should its ranks splinter in the aftermath of recent defections and battlefield setbacks, a war of internecine destruction and atrocities pitting communities and groups against each other might beckon. Instability could also spread across Sudan's Darfur borders, especially into Chad, where the RSF has recruited heavily among Chadian Arabs and where President Mahamat Déby's tacit support for the RSF has sown discord among the country's elite.

There are reasons, however, to suspect that the RSF could prove more resilient, in large part thanks to the UAE's patronage. Substantial backing from abroad means that the RSF could well rebound in Khartoum, despite recent losses. Even if the RSF loses the capital, it could recover and launch a counter-strike, especially if it is able to regather strength in Darfur and Kordofan. It could also extend the war to new areas, such as north of Khartoum, in one of its trademark lightning strikes. Meanwhile, even if its

grip on Sudan's capital continues to slip, the RSF might aim to keep Khartoum unstable enough to prevent Burhan's government from rebuilding the destroyed city without a peace deal.

Some worry that Sudan is drifting into de facto partition, as the two warring sides and their backers entrench themselves in their respective zones of influence. Those concerns heightened in mid-February as the RSF moved toward creating its own allied government at a lavish ceremony in Nairobi, a sign of Kenya's friendly relations with the group. Diplomats fear that an RSF-aligned authority, which could include Abdulaziz al-Hilu, a long-time rebel in South Kordofan's Nuba Mountains, could cement a split in the country. A territorial division might be similar to those in Libya and Yemen, with each side enjoying foreign support, even if there are reasons to doubt that it could prove stable or durable. Concerns that a partition is taking shape have also been fuelled by the alignment of Sudan's remaining civilian politicians and other armed groups with one side or the other.

There are also good reasons to suspect that Burhan and the army will struggle to handle the multitude of forces that he has relied upon to push back the RSF. Crisis Group has [long warned](#) of the risks surrounding the army's strategy of arming such a motley collection of militias, with few visions for Sudan's future shared among them. Tensions are allegedly already rising between Burhan and the Darfuri armed groups that helped pin down RSF fighters in the west while the army launched its offensive on Khartoum. These groups, which also played a central role in the army's recovery of the Jaili oil refinery, worry that Burhan could easily cast them aside if he achieves his primary strategic objective of retaking the capital. Meanwhile, many other groups in Sudan's east and north are now heavily armed and could prove a thorn in the side of Sudan's stability for a long time to come.

The most serious potential rupture, however, is in Burhan's wartime alliance with Sudan's Islamist movement, led by former figures in Bashir's regime and political party, the National Congress Party (NCP). The NCP is fractured after its fall from power, but it is rediscovering its strength on the back of its role in marshalling many of the recent offensives against the RSF. NCP figures express confidence that the party's star is rising, saying it is once again Sudan's most powerful political force. Its ambitions may portend a clash with Burhan, who seeks to maintain military rule over the country. Indeed, Burhan and the NCP recently engaged in a public spat after Burhan said they will not return to rule over the country (he later appeared to walk back his remarks). There are also doubts as to whether the most formidable Islamist militia, the al-Barra battalion, will fall under the NCP's influence or make its own separate demands.

Geopolitical tussling could put further strain on the army's side. In addition to its civil strife, Sudan is beset by a tug of war among various regional powers. Burhan's government has the backing of Egypt, Türkiye, Qatar and Iran, and is also protected by Saudi Arabia. Some of these countries, namely Türkiye, Qatar and Iran, had close ties with the Bashir regime and Sudan's Islamists, while others, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are concerned by those forces' resurgence, though to differing degrees. Israel, too, has long been worried about Islamist and Iranian influence in Sudan, especially in the east, which has previously been a route for weapons smuggling and sits on the strategically critical Red Sea. Western countries, including the U.S., have also traditionally been hostile to Sudan's Islamist movement. All these powers will seek to shape an outcome that leaves them with influence over a post-war Sudan.

A Catalyst for Fresh Peace Efforts?

Attempts to wind down Sudan's war through mediation remain urgent. But they will probably take a back seat so long as the army and its allies believe they are on the cusp of retaking Khartoum, pushing the conflict into a new phase in which they are ascendant. Still, possibilities for mediation could open once again. Should Burhan take Khartoum, he could seek to end the war from a position of strength. Alternatively, if his campaign stalls, both sides might decide that it is in their interest to end a destructive stalemate. Either way, these talks will be extremely hard to manage, in part due to Burhan's unwieldy coalition and the opposition of some of its members to peace talks, including the Islamist movement. Outside powers should nevertheless prepare now for the chance to bring the sides into meaningful peace talks.

As Crisis Group [has argued](#), the discussions that are likely to be critical in setting out a route to halt the fighting are those among Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, the three regional powers with the most influence in Sudan and the most at stake in the conflict. What also seems clear is that ending the war will require a thaw between Burhan and the UAE, even though Arab and Western diplomats now describe the relationship between the two as toxic. The chill reportedly deepened following a testy telephone conversation between Burhan and the Emirati President Mohammed Bin Zayed, said to have been brokered by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, in mid-2024. Those states with ties to both the army and the UAE, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye (which announced an initiative to mediate between Port Sudan and Abu Dhabi in December 2024 that has not yet gained traction), the U.S. and others, should urge both to consider a rapprochement.

Even as clashes continue on the ground, the regional discussions about an endgame should intensify. The new U.S. administration, which has yet to show any interest in Sudan's war, should ideally encourage Riyadh, Cairo and Abu Dhabi along this path. Meanwhile, the African Union's committee

on Sudan, featuring five African heads of state and led by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, should also try to engage the two sides in talks to end the war. Global efforts to scale up humanitarian aid to avert large-scale death from famine should also accelerate, especially given the freeze in support from the U.S., which until now has been by far the largest donor backstopping the emergency response. (The U.S. has officially exempted life-saving aid, including emergency food assistance, from its cuts, but many U.S.-supported kitchens in Sudan that have been a lifeline for starving civilians have been forced to shut down, while other international aid organisations are also halting or paring back their work on the ground.) Britain is planning a pledging conference to this effect in April (as a follow-up to the Paris conference in April 2024), and willing donors should line up behind this effort.

Despite the latest shifts on the battlefield, it seems unlikely that either of the parties can achieve a full military victory that allows them to govern the whole of Sudan. The army is undoubtedly emboldened by its recent gains. But the end is not in sight, and Burhan, Hemedti and their external partners should pay close heed to the risks of a drawn-out civil war that could splinter the country, displace its people and leave it ungovernable. They should instead pursue a definitive end to Sudan's nightmare while they still can.

ecoi.net description:

Article on the armed conflict between the Sudanese armed forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and on the former's efforts to regain control over the city of Khartoum

Country:

Sudan

Source:

[International Crisis Group](#) (Author)

Published:

21 February 2025

Original link:

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/battle-khartoum-marks-crossroads-sudans-civil-war>

Document type:**Appeal or News Release**

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Austrian Centre for

Country of Origin and

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Documentation

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F.A.Q.

Data Protection Notice

Language:

English

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

12 May 2025



Document ID:

2124150

