

The Unthinkable Inferno is Yet to Come: Sudan's Expanding War

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In mid-April war erupted in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). As we edge towards six months since the conflict began, five realities started to become clearer. First, the conflict is metastasizing in ways that may be difficult to contain, for the conflict is morphing into multiple conflicts. It can be argued that both SAF and RSF forces are no longer under their respective central commands. Second, both SAF and RSF have a pool of civilians to draw from using narratives that are largely rooted in ethnicity and tribalism. Third, any peace deal built on the assumption that there are only two sides to this war who have clear objectives is likely to be unsustainable. Fourth, the longer the war continues, the more likely it will create conditions to sustain and expand it, perhaps beyond Sudan. Finally, the role of regional players in this war is no secret and without the regional players coming to terms that would create the path for Sudan to be stable after the collapse of the state it is hard to imagine a stable and peaceful Sudan. This is not to say Sudanese people do not have agency, but to suggest that the regional dynamics are becoming more critical.

In order to understand how the conflict is shifting, we need to understand how it began. Irrespective of how the conflict was ignited, it is indisputable that the so-called RSF had been

¹ This paper is adapted from a Facebook post by the same author in Arabic, available [here](#).

conducting marathon preparations to prepare itself for war prior to the start of hostilities. On the other hand, in the wake October 25, 2021 coup, the Islamists, or rather the alliance of capital and power known as the National Congress Party (NCP) regained control over the state apparatus where they systematically worked to nullify processes of change by the transitional government led by former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok.

One emblematic reversal was the acquittal of those indicted by the Empowerment Removal Committee (ERC) in cases of corruption and theft of public wealth. The acquittals were made under the pretext that the EDC was an illegal, politicized tool. Although the ERC had its share of faulty procedures, mishaps, and missteps which may have given the impression that justice could be turned into a political circus, the systematic and institutionalized corruption of the Al Bashir regime is beyond notorious. And a key factor in motivating Islamist leaders to threaten war and confrontation with the RSF seems to have been the specter that political processes that would challenge the systematic plundering of the country's resources by both the RSF and the Islamists through the Defense Industries System and the octopus of corrupt security companies.

Even as the conflict shifts, these factors remain relevant, and will, without a doubt, play a role in any future political settlement. The competition over power, coupled with a structural lack of cohesion with a multiplicity of armies and a lack of central command, are the direct causes of the eruption and continuation of the war and will need to be addressed in any resolution.

The conflict began in Khartoum but has since spread throughout the country. Death and devastation have wracked Khartoum, Darfur, West Kordofan, and South Kordofan. It has become clear to everyone paying attention that this war is taking place in the dark. Lived experiences of death and destruction are shared and clear, but motivations and operations are not. There is a web of poorly developed plots and lame propaganda campaigns to influence public opinion, but nobody knows how this war works, how its decisions are made, how it is managed, and what the end goals for each faction are. Nobody knows what defines victory in terms of complete control over the country.

One marvels at the narratives presented by the warring factions about the legitimacy of the war, designed to recruit the Sudanese people and win their support. These are truly the eighth and ninth wonders of the world. It is a wonder to claim that RSF troops - who are an extension of the Janjaweed, even if legalized to legitimize extrajudicial killings - would put an end to political and social marginalization, build a modern state, and favor it with democracy. The current behavior of these forces from occupying civilian homes to rape, indiscriminate killing, looting, and other crimes governed by the logic of booty, confirms that their nature is not subject to change. It is evident that no legalization processes, new uniforms, or advanced weapons would alter this core of the RSF.

The ninth wonder of the world is the claim that the SAF has learned its lesson. We are told that the same SAF that created the RSF and nurtured it with training, armament, personnel, and business partnerships at institutional and leadership levels, has come around and grasped the lessons learned from these grave institutional mistakes, and will thoroughly apply corrections. Outside of these wonders, common sense shows that this war is not about dignity, despite the SAF and its supporters trying to create a grand narrative around dignity. It is, rather, a war over power to use the state apparatus to loot resources for the benefit of kleptocratic oligarchs that control the most vital components of the country's economy.

It is counter-productive to debate these narratives devised to manipulate the public on their own terms, which only bestows much-needed political and social legitimacy on this war. A political actor who really aspired to defeat the Islamists and the supporters of the former regime would abstain from occupying people's homes, violating their honor, and plundering their property. It would rather target the corrupt, the Islamist fat cats, but in fact, these are roaming freely with their business partnerships and ties with the Dagalo family's economic empire.

As of today, Sudan has apparently walked into the lion's den. The war's internal conflict dynamics have started to play themselves out. At this point of the conflict, all indications point towards the expansion of the war. First, a large part of RSF troops have left Khartoum, and some of them no longer obey the order of any central command. One piece of evidence of this is the developing confrontation between Bani Halba and Al Salamat clans, both of which were, at least initially, aligned with RSF, in addition to the tensions taking place in Al-Khoei, where soldiers associated with RSF attacked police which ignited confrontation on tribal grounds. RSF members have used their positions in the group to loot others. In one recent incident, Salamat repulsed a looting spree by Bani Halba RSF soldiers empowered by their RSF membership rather than their tribal affiliation, however, once the attack occurs multiple tribes will be dragged into taking sides. As both groups are aligned with RSF, it seems unlikely that such attacks were sanctioned by the leadership.

Second, people began to arm themselves and mobilize on racial and ethnic lines and may latch on to war-related violence to settle previous scores. A number of tribal clashes broke out in several areas in Darfur and Kordofan. An incident in Alfula in West Kordofan, where the situation is still very tense. A small confrontation in which RSF soldiers returning from Khartoum were killed by police escalated to a full confrontation between RSF and SAF, in which the police station was burned and a number of police officers were reportedly killed. Decades of resentment of government authority were evidenced in brutal attacks on government institutions.

All these developments have created a state of tension and fear that looms over the whole country. Most eastern tribal leaders aligned themselves with the SAF and mobilization and recruitment has been underway for months. In addition, Ethiopia is witnessing increased fighting in its Amhara region, and there is rising tension between Ethiopia and Eritrea, both of which may increase fragility and make it harder to maintain peace and security in the East.

On the other hand, the fragility and state of semi-collapse of the SAF is indisputable, as evidenced by the reversals on the battleground. One can argue that a small formation of the RSF could easily advance to the Blue Nile State and control its capital Al-Damazin within hours and there would be no SAF soldiers to protect any of the cities south of Khartoum. Over a month ago, General Burhan called on all Sudanese men who are capable of joining the army to fight for their dignity and many have responded to the call and died in the fight, including some known Resistance Committee members. Similarly, the incidents taking place in the villages scattered in the northern parts of Al Gazira State are a warning of an imminent crisis. Neither SAF nor RSF can contain this war in specific areas. As a case in point, after leaving his hide-out, General Burhan renewed his call for Sudanese youth to join the fight in his speech at a naval base near the Red Sea. All this points to the fact that SAF is not strong enough to continue to fight and it is not in control of Darfur and Kordofan.

Third, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA-North) has gotten involved in military confrontations in South Kordofan. The attacks launched by the SPLA against Kadugli and surrounding towns reflect a bizarre reality that [defies](#) any political or operational logic. These towns have become a refuge for the people who had to flee the inferno of the war in Khartoum and Darfur. On one hand, supporters of SPLM may claim that the military operation in Kadugli is to expand the areas controlled by SPLM and to fend off the RSF and/or that the SPLM should use any opportunity to advance its political objectives. The problem with both points is that SPLM is attacking SAF in a zero-sum game in which attacking SAF benefits the RSF, whom they claim to be fending off. The other challenge is that SPLM does not have the capacity to manage big cities like Kadugli, so how could such expansion advance the SPLM's political objective?

The war risks expanding further. With the RSF falling into disarray and seeing looting opportunities in other cities, it is sensible to envisage that they might expand operations. Given the inefficiency of the SAF and its inability to assume its mandated role to protect the population, civilians are likely to weigh their options for self-defense. More critically, civil society is quite weak and has failed, up to this point, to organize itself and formulate coherent and coordinated discourse that reflects the collective will of the Sudanese people. The structural weakness of civil society has paved the way for ethnic mobilization discourses. In this context, civilians might well arm themselves, and instead of fighting the aggressors, enter into conflicts with the tribes from which the members of the disruptive forces descend. The indicators and red flags regarding these dangerous prospects have become clear, especially in the River Nile State and some areas in eastern Sudan. Worse yet, SAF intelligence harassment of members of these tribes not engaged in any military actions may lead them to see the situation as a zero-sum game, reasoning that they might be killed just for their ethnic affiliation. This is when civilians resort to fighting out of compulsion, not choice; leading to a full-blown civil war that is everywhere with more disastrous outcomes and human suffering.

War scenarios

There are a number of issues around the nature and direction of the current war in Sudan that have demanded my attention since its first days. Here, I put forward the most urgent points in this regard. First, the war will end in one of three scenarios: a complete SAF victory, a complete RSF victory, or a stalemate where victory is unattainable for either faction, which means that the resolution must be negotiated. Second, SAF has advantages which are air force and artillery, but these might be nullified by the swift movement of the RSF and the fact that they don't maintain control of areas they seize. In addition, almost all military confrontations are fought in populated cities and towns, not in trenches. Third, the war will be prolonged, and no quick, decisive victory is possible due to the difficulty of defining the meaning of decisive victory for either faction, which impels the continuation of the war. Finally, once they break out, armed conflicts tend to create their own internal mechanisms and dynamics that will take on a life of their own and that have nothing to do with war narratives, or who fired the first bullet.

Each competing political actor has its own motives and defenses. It is tragic how they all tend to sideline the extent and scope of the suffering of the Sudanese people, both in the war zones and in relatively safe areas. Meanwhile, the conflict has begun to take on a character of its

own, separate from the war narratives, political mobilization, and propaganda. These new dynamics and their unpredictable consequences to a great extent compromise the prospect of a negotiated end to the war. Perhaps the correct approach is to understand the new nature of the conflict (or conflicts) and work through multiple approaches to create solutions that go beyond engagement with unified central commands.

The shifting frameworks governing the negotiation process also reflect a state of fragmentation and disarray. In Addis Ababa, efforts are ongoing to the expand mechanism to unify all efforts under the AU-supported IGAD initiative, but are facing huge challenges. The IGAD initiative was rejected by the SAF, or whoever speaks on its behalf. On the other hand, the political actors of the country have drastically conflicting ideas about the participation of civilians in peace negotiations. The efforts towards building a broad, popular civil front are targeting all sorts of disruption schemes devised by a wide range of political actors in order to alienate the voice of the Sudanese people. A unified popular civilian front could have raised the voice of civilians and reflected their priorities for stopping the war and shaping the national scene in the aftermath of the conflict. Curbing these efforts and fragmenting civil society serves the interests of actors that plan to share the cake of the ruins of post-war Sudan.

To conclude, what is happening to our country is heart breaking. Unfortunately, the indications on the ground and the manner in which the social conflict is developing after more than four months of fighting warn that the war is likely to expand and take on new dimensions. All of this means more death, destruction, and disruption of civil life for students, patients, and the general public. And the worst is that we, as Sudanese, have little left to do other than continue trying to build and organize our civil society, unite it, and coordinate its efforts. But most of the solutions are in the hands of regional and international powers, and unfortunately, it is difficult to say now that there is a regional and international will to provide relief to the Sudanese and help them end the war, rather the war serves regional and international interests, allowing the continuation of the sale of arms, and possibly leading to the division of Sudan or its transformation into a new Somalia. In the face of this pain, we must do what we can to change these new dynamics of conflict. We also have to prepare ourselves for extended psychological suffering and be ready for a difficult period in our national history.

So, what to be done about these developments?

In my opinion, any political solution that disregards the fact that the RSF has no role to play in the political future of the country, has no chance of acceptance. On the other hand, there can be no role for the military institution in any future political life. All the current leaders of SAF must be removed, and its role must be confined to arrangements related to a permanent ceasefire and withdrawal of troops from the cities. Incentives, threats and all sources of leverage are needed to persuade the belligerents that none of their objectives can be achieved through the war, rather that war means loss and weakness. As such they must be shown other means to accomplish their objectives

The above-mentioned steps must take place in conjunction with the arrival of regional forces to maintain security (this could be something similar to the IGAD proposal with additional

careful consideration about the composition and mandate of the force) and the commencement of a phase of rehabilitation followed by an internationally coordinated demobilization process. Meanwhile, it is also crucial to retain a small, elite force that can serve as the nucleus of the state's future army. The foundation of this national institution should be completed upon the consensus of the Sudanese people on a national development project and permanent constitution which clearly defines and delineates the future role of the army beyond the clichés/generalization of defending national borders and safeguarding the constitution.

Equally important is that clear and specific procedures must be in place to hold the perpetrators of war crimes and destruction accountable. The price of peace should neither be impunity nor rewarding these actors with political roles, as some politicians, who claim wisdom and pragmatism, argue.

Policy Recommendation for Local, Regional and International Actors

In this context, local, regional and international actors should:

- Monitor the conflict closely and prepare both humanitarian and mediation strategies;
- Take agile steps to end the competition and contradictions among initiatives led by IGAD, the AU, Egypt and the US and Saudi Arabia in Jeddah, better coordinate them and tune them to the emerging nature of the conflict;
- Engage Sudanese civilians in a continuous process of monitoring how what started as a SAF vs. RSF conflict is morphing into multiple conflicts with multifaceted dynamics;
- Take steps to contain the tensions in eastern Sudan to avoid the expansion of war to what have become safe havens for the displaced.