

The War on Iran: Regional Power Politics and Domestic Exclusion

How regional wars and international designations are invoked in Sudan's internal political conflict

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The ongoing US–Israeli war on Iran is reverberating far beyond the Middle East, shaping political debates even within Sudan. Regardless of one's position vis-a-vis Iran's political system, a fundamental principle remains: when a foreign power launches a military attack against a sovereign state, this constitutes a violation of core norms of the international order—state sovereignty and the prohibition on the use of force.

Thus, positions on the war should not be determined by one's view of the Iranian regime itself, but by the broader principles that govern international relations.

What makes the current war particularly significant is that it unfolds within a wider struggle over regional influence and power in the Middle East and attempts to reshape that balance of power. Israel's prime minister recently made this point explicitly, describing ongoing military operations in this way and asserting that Israel has effectively become a regional power.

Meanwhile, in Sudan opinions about the war goes are not only diverse but have been used as a tool within Sudan's own internal political conflict. Some narratives portray the war as an opportunity to weaken domestic political rivals—particularly Islamist actors—based on the assumption that Sudanese Islamists maintain an “organic” ideological relationship with Iran, supposedly inspired by the Iranian model of governance despite the Sunni–Shia divide.

At first glance, this argument may appear convincing. However, it rests on a simplistic interpretation of the historical relationship between Sudan and Iran, ignoring major transformations that have shaped Sudanese politics over the past three decades.

During the early years of the National Salvation regime in the 1990s, Sudan–Iran relations indeed experienced a period of political and security cooperation. This rapprochement became evident with the visit of Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to Khartoum in late 1991, less than two years after the regime came to power through the 1989 military coup that overthrew an elected government.

At the time, Sudan faced growing international isolation and regional pressure, prompting the new regime to seek partners outside the region's traditional alliances. It was in this context that political and military ties with Iran expanded. This cooperation may have contributed, at least in part, to the development of Sudan's domestic military-industrial capacity.

Yet this cooperation did not translate into the wholesale adoption of Iran's ideological model in Sudan. Over time, the ideological link effectively faded, even if some channels of political or military cooperation continued. In reality, Iran's intellectual or sectarian influence within Sudanese society remained



extremely limited. In fact, the impact of other foreign cultural institutions—Russian, German, or French—often exceeded that Iran.

It is true that some Sudanese Islamist leaders during that period expressed interest in the Iranian revolutionary experience as an example of the successful rise of an Islamic movement. Some also participated in visits or training programs in Iran. Yet such engagement occurred largely within broader intellectual debates among Islamist movements and did not imply a wholesale adoption of the Iranian model or transform Sudan's Islamist movement into an extension of Iran's.

Meanwhile, Sudan's political trajectory was evolving in a different direction. By the second half of the 1990s, important shifts were taking place within Sudan's political landscape. Some opposition figures returned to the country, including Sharif Zain al-Abidin al-Hindi in 1996 and later Sadiq al-Mahdi following the 1999 Djibouti agreement. Other traditional political forces also re-entered political life to varying degrees, while some political forces—such as the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)—largely remained in opposition under the umbrella of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

Subsequent developments further reshaped Sudan's political context. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005, followed by the Cairo Peace Agreement between the NDA and the regime, led to elections in 2010 and 2015. Indeed, preparations were underway for elections in 2020 before the political upheavals associated with the December 2018 revolution transformed the political landscape.

During these years, most Sudanese political actors—including armed movements—were engaged, in one way or another, in negotiations or political arrangements with the regime.

A major turning point in Sudan–Iran relations came in 2015. Sudan severed diplomatic ties with Tehran and joined the Saudi-led Arab coalition in Yemen, contributing troops to Operation Decisive Storm against the Houthi movement, widely viewed as one of Iran's key regional allies. This move clearly reflected Sudan's shifting regional alignment and demonstrated that its foreign policy decisions were shaped primarily by **changing strategic calculations** rather than **fixed ideological commitments**.

Diplomatic relations between Sudan and Iran were not restored until mid-2024, following the outbreak of Sudan's current war, when diplomatic representation resumed after nearly eight years of severed ties. Sudan appointed a professional diplomat as ambassador—a normal practice in state-to-state relations, even when countries hold differing political or ideological views.

Highlighting this trajectory is not intended to defend the previous regime or absolve its controversial political record. Rather, it seeks to correct the oversimplified narrative which explains Sudan's internal political conflict through the lens of its past relationship with Iran.

This raises an important question: where exactly has Iran figured in Sudan's political conflicts over these decades? In reality, Iran's influence has remained marginal as Sudan's internal struggles have been shaped primarily by domestic dynamics rather than external alignments.

Acknowledging this does not deny the existence of contacts between Sudanese Islamists and Iran following the Iranian Revolution, nor does it deny that certain individuals or ideological circles continue to admire aspects of the Iranian experience. Such intellectual affinities are not unusual within Islamist movements influenced by ideas associated with the Islamic revival (*al-Sahwa*), particularly the notion of a transnational Muslim community that transcends divisions. However, these currents have had limited influence on the social base of Sudanese Islamism and even less on Sudanese society at large.

The more important issue in Sudan's current debate is not the historical relationship itself, but how it is invoked within the country's internal political struggle. Instead of treating the regional war as a serious development with implications for international law and regional stability, it is sometimes interpreted through the narrow lens of Sudanese political rivalry.

This dynamic has produced what might be described as mutual "political schadenfreude." Some anti-Islamist actors expressed satisfaction when missile attacks targeted Iran, which they view as politically

aligned with Sudan's government. Conversely, some opposition voices suggested that the war against Iran would ultimately weaken Sudan's Islamist establishment.

The situation was further complicated after the recent United States designation of Sudan's Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization—a step welcomed by some actors as a political victory in Sudan's domestic conflict.

At the same time, many voices have called for designating the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) as a terrorist organization because of the severe violations committed during Sudan's ongoing war. This demand has gained traction within certain policy circles in Washington.

In both cases, the same logic is at work: projecting Sudan's internal political struggle into the international arena in the hope that regional wars or international designations will achieve what domestic politics have failed to resolve.

Yet experience in Sudan and elsewhere suggests that such expectations are misplaced. Regional wars rarely resolve domestic political conflicts, and international designations do not erase the social or political presence of internal actors.

Rejecting the U.S.–Israeli war on Iran does not imply endorsing the Iranian government's policies or ignoring its own regional interventions. But the principle remains clear: the use of military force against a sovereign state is an act of aggression, with certain narrow exceptions, regardless of the nature of that state's political system.

Disagreement with a country's policies does not justify aggression. Nor should this conflict be reduced to a confrontation with a particular regime when it clearly forms part of a broader struggle over power and influence in the Middle East.

Using regional wars for domestic purposes only reinforces a long-standing pattern in Sudanese politics: the cycle of exclusion and counter-exclusion.

Sudan's crisis will not be resolved through regional wars or through terrorist designations issued from distant capitals. It can only be addressed by building robust national political arrangements capable of managing diversity and political competition within Sudan itself.

Conclusion

In this context, it is useful to recall a broader discussion about the increasing reliance on terrorist designations as instruments in Sudan's political struggles. In a discussion paper I published in December 2025 titled "*Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: Exclusion through Designation Instead of Politics*," I raised several questions for Sudan's political and societal leaders: Is terrorist designation truly an effective tool for ending political conflict, or does it risk prolonging it? What impact does this approach have on prospects for a comprehensive political settlement in Sudan? And does internationalizing domestic conflicts through external designations strengthen the state—or weaken it?

That paper did not question the legitimacy and imperative of accountability or justice. Rather, it distinguished between justice as a comprehensive political and legal process and designation as a temporary instrument of political exclusion.

Today, as regional war intensifies and calls for new designations grow louder, posing these questions is more urgent than ever. Another US decision to designate the RSF as a terrorist organization—something many are already advocating, including voices within the United States—could deepen Sudan's political and social polarization, triggering yet another round of political schadenfreude among Sudanese factions.

The essential question therefore remains: how long will Sudan's political life and future remain trapped in this vicious cycle—of exclusion and counter-exclusion, and from domestic political failure to reliance on external actors to settle internal disputes? Breaking this cycle will not come through regional wars

or foreign designations. It can only come when Sudanese themselves become able to build a national political order capable of managing conflict without exclusion.

No regional war—and no foreign designation—can solve a problem that must ultimately be resolved by Sudanese themselves.