Mapping Sudan Conflict Through the Conflict Wheel Model: A Comprehensive Analysis

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Sowaiba Mahmood[1] & *Maria Saifuddin Effendi[2]

Abstract
The discipline of Peace and Conflict Studies offers unique and technical ways to map, assess, and analyze conflict. In the case of Sudan, a gap in the existing literature is the lack of a systematic, technical analysis of the conflict using a mapping or model. This analytical/technical framework gap is addressed in this research paper. The first aim is to apply the Conflict Wheel Model to study the Sudan conflict and present a multi-layered causal, profile, dynamic, and scenario-based analysis. The second aim is to analyze the interconnectedness between dynamics, root causes, and actors that culminated in the April 2023 war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). This paper follows a qualitative research methodology through historical analysis and includes both primary and secondary sources.

Keywords
Sudan, RSF, SAF conflict wheel model, conflict mapping

Introduction
Conflict Analysis is an emerging discipline within the social sciences, particularly Peace and Conflict Studies. Very few conflicts are mapped using existing tools and models of conflict analysis. This study uses the conflict analysis wheel to map Sudan's conflict and provide a comprehensive assessment of its root and proximate causes, actors, positions, goals and interests, prevailing conditions, costs and benefits, case scenarios, options, and strategies. Although the conflict in Sudan has been extensively researched, its analysis using a mapping model remains underexplored in the literature. The paper argues that the April 2023 war has deeper roots in structural inequalities, power imbalances, and racialized hierarchies among Arab-Muslim elites. These dynamics created racial divisions and systemic structural violence by marginalizing peripheral entities, ultimately producing the war's fundamental root

[1] *Sowaiba Mahmood* is an MPhil scholar at the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, National Defence University, and an independent analyst, Pakistan.
[2] *Corresponding Author: *Maria Saifuddin Effendi* is an Assistant Professor and Head of Department, Peace and Conflict Studies, National Defence University, Pakistan
E-mail: maria@ndu.edu.pk

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causes. The conflict grew and transformed from being internal to internationalized with the involvement of Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Russia, and Turkey. Thus, this research demonstrates the value of an integrated framework for examining the disconnect between actors' self-professed democratic goals and their strong interests in maintaining economic empires and avoiding accountability.

Since gaining independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule in 1956, Sudan has experienced some of Africa's longest and deadliest conflicts. Sudan has 0.63% of the world's total population, with more than fifty million people (Worldometer, n.d.). Yet maintaining a stable political order has always been a challenge for this country, whether under a civil or a military regime. Elements such as disparities in governance between the center and peripheral regions, regional differences in both economy and politics, and high levels of social diversity are responsible for the state's profound instability (Berghof Foundation, 2006). In the aftermath, various rebel groups emerged, and a series of civil wars began, fueled along ethnic, religious, and economic lines with roots in colonial legacies (SAPA, 2025). The interplay and reinforcement of elements such as localized disputes, political struggles, profound ethnic divisions, and regional geopolitical dynamics make Sudan a 'complex conflict system' (de Waal, 2015). These historical and structural imbalances make Sudan a significant case for examining how interconnected causes contribute to recurrence and transformation of conflict.

Sudan's conflict has evolved from the historical North–South divide to multiple regional conflicts, particularly in the East and West, reflecting changing political, ethnic, and socio-economic tensions (Daily Mail, 2025). The country suffered two major civil wars, 1955-1972 and 1983-2005, both driven by the center's dominance and the marginalization of the peripheries (Berghof Foundation, 2006). Following the Darfur conflict in 2003, a new trajectory emerged, marked by militia activity, identity politics, the militarization of governance, and competition over resources. To end the second civil war, a Comprehensive Peace Agreement was established in 2005, which led to the secession of South Sudan in 2011. Rather than solving the underlying issues, this secession set a new precedent for division based on authority and resource competition. The 2019 revolution, which toppled the Omar al-Bashir regime, created a window for democratic transition, but it was also followed by a coup in 2021, leading to a violent confrontation between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in April 2023. In the aftermath, Sudan became the site of the largest displacement and humanitarian crisis, with 12 million displaced and 15.8 million in dire need of aid (International Rescue Committee, 2023).

Sudan's conflict is often analyzed through isolated lenses, overlooking how elite power, ethnic divisions, governance failures, economic inequality, and resource competition reinforce one another. Understanding its recurrence and transformation requires an inclusive framework that maps these interconnected drivers. Existing literature applies theories such as Protracted Social Conflict, Greed and Grievance, political economy, and civil-military relations, but lacks an integrated map of root and proximate causes, actors, interests, goals, and positions. Although these approaches offer valuable insights into specific dimensions of the conflict, they do not necessarily explain how these factors interact and reinforce one another within the broader conflict system.

Historical and scholarly works reflect a range of analytical perspectives on the Sudanese conflicts and offer ample insight from multiple angles. Historical and

structural analysis helps uncover the enduring causes of conflict and provides a deeper understanding of how grievances, economic interests, and communal divisions contribute to conflict processes. Political economy and identity-based analysis help identify how these interests and divisions may manifest in both the deep and the daily roots of conflict. Likewise, conflict analysis can provide information on actors and their relationships. However, examining these aspects from different analytical angles will not, on its own, be sufficient to define how they correlate in creating and maintaining a specific conflict situation. Integration is therefore needed: an analytical framework that will bind the historical and structural situation in Sudan to the current political, military, and economic developments that underpin the present SAF-RSF conflict.

To meet this analytical need, the present study uses the Conflict Wheel Model to analyze the conflict in Sudan in an integrated manner, including root causes, immediate causes, actors, goals, positions, interests, and the current situation. The interrelationships among the four factors of inequality, different political and economic conditions in the world, and military rivalry are explored rather than examined in isolation. In doing so, it aims to shed light on how Sudan's specific dynamics of marginalization and power imbalances have amplified the current political and military dynamics, leading to the outbreak, escalation, and persistence of conflict between the SAF and the RSF.

The primary research question addressed in this paper is as follows: How can the Conflict Wheel Model systematically map and analyze the conflict in Sudan? With sub-questions: (i) How can a single framework be established to understand the underlying factors and see the interconnectedness of various dynamics of the conflict? and (ii) How do direct and indirect actors shape the conflict structure of Sudan through their competing and contrasting interests, goals, and positions?

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology; it seeks insight into the Sudan conflict and explains it through a conflict analysis tool. This approach is appropriate because it provides a deep understanding of political dynamics, historical footprints, and the motivations of actors that quantitative data cannot capture. In terms of research type, it is explanatory, as this study is not only descriptive of the historical events but also analyzes the relationships among the factors of the conflict. It aims to explain the interplay among structural inequalities, historical marginalization, political and economic struggle, and military confrontation that sparked the April 2023 conflict between the SAF and the RSF. It also looks at the impact of the lack of political transition, pitfalls in security-sector integration, and the conflicting demands of the warring parties on the rise and persistence of the conflict.

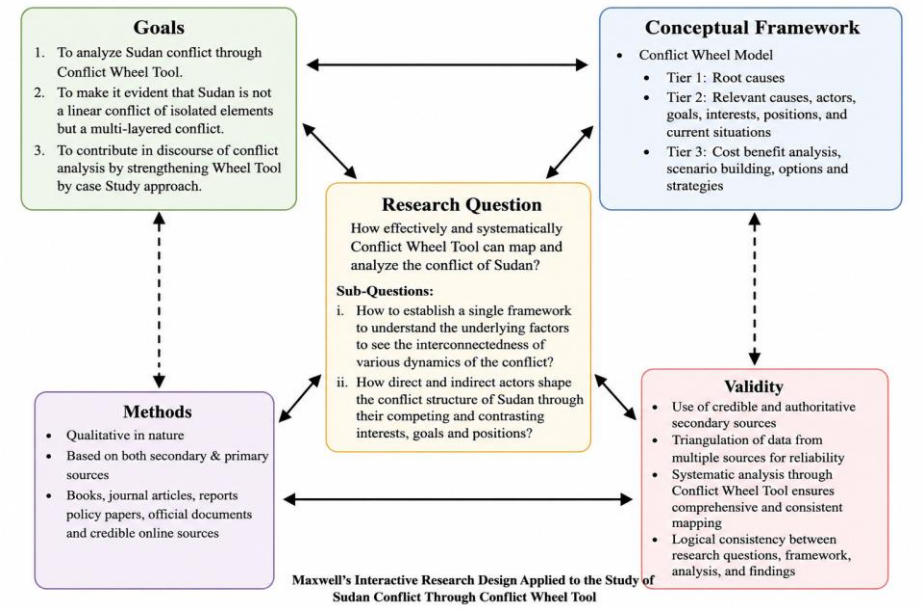
The research consulted both primary and secondary sources, including books, research journals, reports, and datasets. This research is based on a constructivist ontological paradigm and an interpretivist epistemological approach. The constructivist approach to social and political realities focuses on the role of historical, social, and political interactions in shaping them, such as governance, marginalization, ethnic identities, and political legitimacy. The conflict in Sudan, therefore, is understood within its historical and socio-political context, rather than as a simple battle. An interpretivist epistemological approach involves developing knowledge through the interpretation of historical developments, political decisions, and conflict actors' publicly stated positions and interests. Through this analysis,

research explores how actors perceive their goals and work toward them, as well as the nature of actors' relationships and their effects on the conflict. For this reason, the study uses historical qualitative analysis to examine the causes and intertwined events of the war that occurred in April 2023. The Conflict Wheel is the conceptual framework of this research, which primarily focuses on analyzing the recent upheavals, the toppling of the Omar al-Bashir regime, and the violent breakthrough in 2023, in the context of historical events since 2003. Hence, anything beyond this time frame is not covered here.

Operationalization of Conflict Wheel Model

The Conflict Wheel was operationalized by structuring the collected qualitative evidence through analysis of the components of each factor of the conflict in Sudan, based on the nature, timing, and function of each factor. Political, economic, and social inequalities, whether historical or ongoing, were classified as root causes, whereas more recent political changes, institutional decisions, and economic disputes that played a role in the outbreak of the war in April 2023 were considered relevant or proximate causes. Actors were distinguished as direct or indirect based on their role in the armed confrontation or their influence on the process of the confrontation. Goals were distinguished from interests by examining actors' desired consequences; positions from actors' motivations and incentives; and officially voiced demands. The current situation category included evidence on military developments, the humanitarian situation, and territorial control. The other parts were used to determine the possible directions of the conflict, to analyze how the various scenarios might play out, and to identify possible approaches to dealing with and resolving the conflict. This classification allowed for an examination of the components of the structural, immediate triggers, and actors' competing motivations from a common analytic perspective. Additionally, the research follows the design shown in Figure 1, based on Maxwell’s (2013) research.

Figure 1. Maxwell's (2013) Interactive Design Applied to the Study of Sudan Conflict.



Conceptual Framework: Conflict Wheel Model

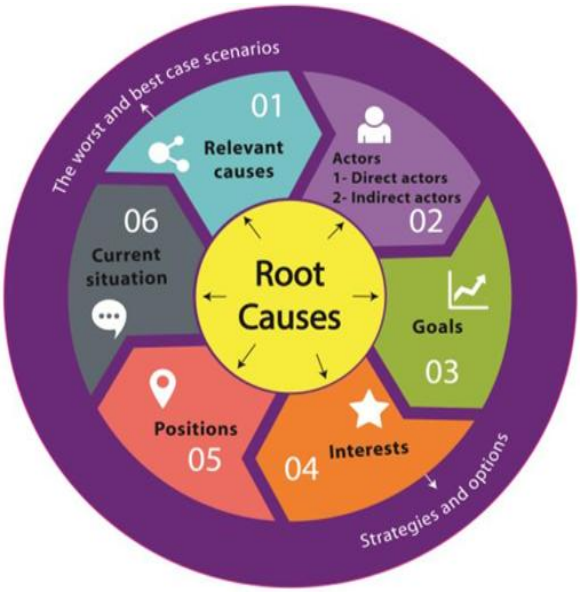
According to Miles and Huberman (1994), conceptual frameworks can be rudimentary or elaborate, theory-driven or commonsensical, descriptive or causal. This means that if prior theories or frameworks are not well suited or do not cover the various dimensions, the researcher can establish one to explain the topic and prevent overgeneralization. In Sudan's case, there is a need for a framework that analyzes the conflict as a system and covers historical elements, structural issues, actors' evolution, and their interests. Therefore, this research adopts the Conflict Wheel Model as its conceptual framework.

Conflict analysis is widely regarded as an important step toward managing and resolving conflicts peacefully. It is defined as a systematic study of profiles, causes, actors, and dynamics of conflict (Nicaise, 2014; Ramsbotham et al., 2016). It helps differentiate between visible issues and underlying causes. Conflict Analysis is not an objective art; it has different perspectives. First is the Harvard approach, by Fisher et al. (2011), which explains four main principles of conflict resolution in the book Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In. These are to differentiate between actual issues and emotions, to focus on actors' interests instead of their positions, to formulate a mutual formula to deal with the conflict, and to emphasize objective criteria. This means the focus should be on interests rather than positions to peacefully resolve conflicts. John Burton's (1990) Human Needs Theory says that unfulfilled human needs are responsible for conflict, so they should be prioritized. The last one is a Conflict Transformation approach, which addresses root causes and relationships and develops tolerance, leading to sustainable peace (Lederach, 1996).

Conflict analysis also determines the intervention with consideration of conflict sensitivity, the interaction between context and intervention. It's about

achieving more positive results and preventing negative ones (Maher, 2019). In this account, demarcation of the system boundaries of conflict and its impact is essential. Once the demarcation of a conflict system is done, any conflict analysis tool can be applied for mapping. Conflict analysts have developed many tools for mapping and analysis, though this research adopts the Wheel Model developed by Maria S. Effendi in 2019, which is inspired by the work of Galtung, a pioneer in Peace and Conflict Studies (Ansari et al., 2019).

Figure 2. Conflict Wheel Model (Ansari et al., 2019)



The Conflict Wheel Model, as shown in Figure 2, is considered a meta-analysis tool because it integrates multiple lenses and allows different approaches to coexist within a single framework. It bridges the levels of analysis; the macro level includes governance systems, etc.; the micro level includes actors' perceptions, etc.; and the meso level refers to institutions, etc. It also offers methodological flexibility by incorporating other tools. This meta nature of the wheel makes it appropriate for understanding and analyzing complex conflicts like Sudan.

The Wheel provides an overview by compartmentalizing the conflict into tiers; three of them are causal factors, the fourth is the ground situation, the fifth addresses benefits against risks and draws hypothetical results, and the last is about options and strategies that can be applied to achieve desired outcomes (Ansari et al., 2019; Lin, 2018). To summarize, the Wheel offers multi-layered analysis, including causal analysis, profile and dynamics analysis, and scenario-based analysis. The reason for using the Wheel Model is that conflicts are neither spontaneous nor exclusive to a single element; they are the aftermath of interactions among competing actors fighting over control and power over mutual resources or human needs (Salihu & Enwere, 2023). The following are the components of the Conflict Wheel Model.

Root Causes

Root causes are the primary drivers of conflict and sustain its intensity. The 5-Ws (Who, What, When, Where, Why) and 1-H (How) method is essential for identifying them. Understanding root causes enables timely intervention to manage or resolve the conflict. According to MacFarland (as cited in Noel, 2025), an effective practitioner must understand the inception, development, and evolution of a conflict. Root causes can take multiple forms, embedded in social and economic structures, identity-based issues, or historical grievances. History is unavoidable when looking for root causes,

as conflicts without a past are rare. Root causes also shape the roles actors can play and precede interests and dynamics in conflict analysis.

1. ***Relevant Causes***
   Relevant causes, also known as proximate causes, arise from root causes and might be any episode, event, policy, or any new turn in the context that significantly impacts the life cycle of the conflict. Simply, they are like the add-on elements that become activators and reactivators of conflict. Michael E. Brown (1996) argues that structural issues alone are not responsible for violence; there must be a political process. Relevant causes define the conflict trajectory; conflicts do have similar root causes, but their trajectories and moments of violent engagement differ due to unique relevant causes.

2. ***Actors (Direct & Indirect)***
   Actors are those involved in and affected by the conflict. Those with direct contact are 'conflicting parties', and those making transformation efforts are called third parties. There are two kinds of actors. Direct actors are in primary contact with people serving as the central direct actors. Indirect actors are involved from a distance but formulate the course of the conflict by taking sides and intervening to escalate or de-escalate it; their involvement can be overt or covert. The Conflict Wheel Model has the capacity to analyze actors in multiple layers.

3. ***Goals***
   Goals might be the overarching aim of actors in conflict or in the resolution of conflict. They might be political, regional, or ideological and can be both long- and short-term. Goals are different from interests; they are strategic and results-oriented.

4. ***Interests***
   Interests are the motivations, fears, and incentives that shape actors' behavior (Fisher et al., 2011). They may be immediate or long-term, and they differ from positions, which are what actors publicly demand. Resolution is more likely to succeed when the interests of every party are given sufficient attention.

5. ***Positions***
   Positions are publicly stated in the demands and stances of the actors. They appear inflexible, though they are negotiable. They are like bargaining chips; if used as political leverage, the cost of conflict can be high.

6. ***Current Situation***
   It's about the current state: an update on humanitarian conditions and efforts for peace development. It is well addressed in the Conflict Wheel Model.

The Worst and Best Case Scenario

It concerns prospects related to decision-making elements. The worst scenario indicates the amplification of conflict, including militarization and humanitarian crises, which complicate future peace efforts. By contrast, the best scenario is de-escalation and successful peace efforts. The scenarios are designed to prepare conflict actors and stakeholders for better performance and to work on the right strategy to address the conflict in its best or worst possible scenarios. However, the wheel

presents the consequences of adopted strategies rather than making prophecies about results.

Cost-Benefit Analysis
It assesses the likely outcomes of continued conflict. The costs include institutional collapse and human and economic losses. On the other hand, benefits include institutional development, human security, and economic development.

Strategies and Options
Strategies can be adversarial or cooperative, such as coercion or avoidance in dialogue, and confidence-building measures. Actors identify options and assess the feasibility and risks of actions. The wheel facilitates decision-making by mapping the strategies.

Application of Conflict Wheel Model to Sudan Conflict

This section systematically maps the Sudan conflict using the wheel framework and examines the root causes, the evolution of actors, their motivations, and the interlinked elements that reinforce conflict. Mapping Sudan is not only necessary within the paradigm of conflict analysis but also essential for practical conflict resolution and peacebuilding strategies. This structural mapping will overcome prior research limitations, including partial diagnosis and an inability to capture interdependencies in recurring violence.

Root Causes
After independence, Sudan inherited a centralized governance system from the Anglo-Egyptian colonial pattern, causing asymmetric development and systematic marginalization (Berghof Foundation, 2006). The colonial period was an era of resource exploitation that served colonial interests and neglected indigenous people. The colonial regime preferred to appoint northern and northwestern Sudanese to civil and military positions, leaving southern Sudanese behind (Weldemichael, 2025). In the aftermath, a strong sentiment of North vs. South emerged. The center vs. periphery dynamic is also a root of structural conflict in Sudan. Sudan is a highly unequal and divided country along political, social, economic, ethnic, and class lines, and ultimately power and resources belong to the central elite, while the periphery receives no recognition in the political and economic sectors. In the last three decades, most economic activities have been controlled by the military, while the periphery has been pushed toward food insecurity.

Identity and cultural marginalization are also one of the main root causes of instability in Sudan. This identity crisis has deep roots in colonization, which divided Sudan's community along Arab and African lines. Postcolonial policies attempted Arabization and Islamization without taking into account the sheer non-Arab and non-Islamic population. In the aftermath, they suffered exclusion from full citizenship and political representation (Gai & Wanyama, 2025). Ultimately, the populations of Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, South Kordofan, Blue Nile, and other peripheries suffered racialized marginalization.

These asymmetric structures, which placed political and economic authority in the central regions of Sudan and made the peripheries of society seem less important, were one factor in the militarization of Sudan's political realm. The state's reliance on armed militias for pacification reinforced the power of non-state military actors and, over time, altered the dynamics of the security structure. This dependence

increased the strength of non-state military actors and, over time, shifted the balance of power within the security structure, particularly concerning the state's dominance in the conflict. The RSF, which emerged from the Janjaweed militias, was formally established in 2013 (Konozy & Baleela, 2025). Over time, they evolved into a well-organized paramilitary force with an independent command structure, significant military capabilities, and considerable economic power. Historically, militarized governance and the use of peripheral armed groups fostered the development of competing centers of military and political authority. These structural issues may not have been the immediate causes of the war of April 2023, but they certainly influenced the institutional and power dynamics through which the conflict between SAF and RSF played out. The immediate outbreak should therefore be viewed as a dynamic interplay among the historical context, the ensuing political transition, differences in integration into the security sector, and the struggle for economic and military domination.

Relevant Causes

This research identified three major causes of the present war. The first and most crucial was the failure of the 2019 power-sharing agreement. Under the agreement, the military retained significant control over the defense and interior ministries, along with considerable influence over the country's economy, without facing meaningful accountability for human rights violations (Kurtz, 2024). However, the agreement also envisaged a gradual transition towards civilian rule, which could eventually challenge the military's political influence, economic autonomy and immunity from accountability. Although the agreement was signed under pressure, Sudan's generals retained considerable power and were able to undermine the transition when they perceived it as a threat to their interests. Eventually, the military staged a coup in October 2021, dissolving the civilian government and derailing the transition towards democratic rule (International Crisis Group, 2022).

The December 2022 Framework Agreement was intended to resolve the unresolved question of security-sector integration. Following the backlash against the October 2021 coup, the military and civilian signatories, supported by the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), agreed on the Framework Agreement to restart the democratic transition (International Crisis Group, 2022). However, the framework was ambiguous about the timeline and process for integrating RSF into SAF, one of the major reasons for violent breakthroughs. The debate around integration wasn't only a technical question of security-sector integration but also of who controlled the military and how their respective control over the political sphere would develop. SAF supported a relatively shorter integration period, while the RSF sought a longer timeframe, allowing it to maintain its institutional autonomy. There was also disagreement over the structure of the proposed combined force. These unaddressed issues deepened the lack of trust between the military communities. Both sides escalated deployments of their forces in the weeks leading up to April 2023, concentrating around Khartoum and other strategically important areas.

On 13 April 2023, the SAF raised public objections to the deployment of RSF forces, stating that these movements had taken place without its approval or coordination and could undermine security in the country (Security Council Report,

2023). Two days later, on 15 April, armed clashes broke out between the SAF and RSF in Khartoum and subsequently spread to other parts of Sudan (ACAPS, 2023). As political negotiations over the integration of the RSF into the national army continued to collapse, disagreements over the timeline and command structure of the proposed integration, alongside the growing military deployments, intensified tensions and contributed to the outbreak of open armed conflict (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The third relevant cause is economic interest, which is at stake if a transition occurs. SAF owns corporations across sectors, from telecommunications to meat processing, whereas RSF owns the gold business, with about fifty different companies in Sudan (Wegener, 2025). SAF fears the transition because it will place them under civilian rule, and for RSF it means the loss of autonomous economic structures. Autonomy for both groups is essential to avoid the consequences of their actions in the Darfur conflict. This power struggle is primarily about control of the state's resources, without any ideological basis. Together, these causes transform structural tensions into a devastating war.

Combining these elements, it is evident that the war in April 2023 is not solely a political question or a military conflict. Pre-existing structural power dynamics distributed military and economic power among competing elites, and the institutionalization of military authority enabled the development of armed actors and their autonomy. Further erosion of civilian power during the 2019 political transition and the coup in October 2021 heightened tensions between the SAF and RSF. The Framework Agreement, however, showed that the conflict between SAF and RSF was not yet resolved, mainly regarding the issue of military integration, command, and institutional autonomy. The competition for economic resources was also a major element of these disagreements, since both armed forces' status as providers of the FFC budget and their role as civilian overseers created potential threats to the independent economic interests of both arms. Thus, structural inequalities historically set the conditions, political decisions did nothing to counteract the institutional inequity, and confrontation was heightened by military and economic competition.

Actors (Direct & Indirect)

Sudan has a complex structure of actors that has turned an internal struggle into an internationalized war. This conflict has two direct actors, including SAF, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the RSF, led by Mohamed Hamdan Daglo (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). SAF is the country's conventional army, and most of its recruits are drawn from northern riverine populations, contributing to regional imbalances within the security institutions. RSF evolved from Janjaweed militias created to counter the insurgency in Darfur in 2003, and most of its recruits are from Arab communities in Darfur. The Darfur conflict was a significant factor in the emergence of the RSF and, consequently, shaped the conditions that contributed to the present war. It is a crucial pattern to observe that when the state depends on peripheral militias against insurgency, it empowers them to become independent actors capable of challenging government authority. Former rebel groups of Darfur, the Sudan Liberation Movement and the Justice and Equality Movement, have sided with SAF, while other groups have formed strategic alliances based on their grievances and political interests (Fayard et al., 2026).

There are numerous indirect actors, mainly regional and international powers. The UAE supports RSF, with interests in countering Islamist influences and securing access to the Red Sea (Horner, 2025). Egypt supports SAF due to interests in Nile water, border security, and a preference for a military regime in its southern neighbor (Keath & Price, 2025). Saudi Arabia acted as a mediator, though it finances SAF (Assefa, 2025). Russia's Wagner Group is also involved and has supplied arms, reportedly linked to gold-mining concessions. Turkey supported SAF by providing Bayraktar TB2 drones to expand influence in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea (Kendall, 2024). To influence the Red Sea, Iran has sent nine cargo planes with military equipment since 2023 (Rolandsen & Sastre Bel, 2025). Chad's role is controversial, as it has been accused of permitting UAE shipments through its territory (Assefa, 2025). Ethiopia and Eritrea are also implicated. Sudan's army-led authorities accuse Ethiopia of facilitating support to the RSF, which Addis Ababa denies, while Eritrea is widely reported to back the SAF (Nesibu, 2026). The involvement of all these actors makes the conflict protracted and complex. Whoever gains control of Sudan will have an impact on the region, in the Horn of Africa as well as Sub-Saharan Africa.

Goals

Regarding goals, there is a contradiction between public speeches and the real ambitions of both SAF and RSF. SAF publicly states that it aims to defend national sovereignty, maintain state institutions, protect Sudan from militias, restore constitutional order, and achieve a democratic transition. Similarly, RSF presents itself as a supporter of democracy and denies having ambitions to govern Sudan, while claiming to represent marginalized communities (Elhag, 2024). However, it established a parallel government, the Government of Peace and Unity. In practice, both forces seek to maintain political influence and control over state institutions and economic resources, undermining the prospects for a genuine civilian-led democratic transition (Krause, 2024). Furthermore, their extensive economic interests and military autonomy create obstacles to civilian oversight and accountability for alleged war crimes and other human rights violations.

Interests

As for SAF, its primary interest is to restore its institutional survival and monopoly as the guardian of state and economic dominance. It portrays itself as a nation builder, and the hegemony and elimination of authorities granted to paramilitary forces parallel to those of the SAF. RSF, by contrast, seeks to maintain its autonomous economy and power structures without integrating into the SAF. Both SAF and RSF avoid accountability, as they are blamed for the 2003 Darfur massacre and the 2019 revolution (Soliman & Hassan, 2023). Integrating RSF into SAF would abolish RSF's autonomy, while SAF under civilian rule would lead to the prosecution of war crimes. These intersecting interests are the reasons for this power struggle rather than for negotiated integration.

Positions

The positions of both SAF and RSF are incompatible. The SAF demands the RSF's withdrawal from all occupied areas as a condition for negotiations (Booth & Satti, 2024). This precondition has complicated efforts to resume negotiations, as it requires the RSF to relinquish its territorial gains before entering talks. The SAF also objects to the UAE's participation in the Geneva talks as an observer, making it clear that its

demands extend beyond the military to include international actors (Cordall, 2025). While the RSF shows willingness to negotiate and cooperate on humanitarian efforts to restore its deteriorated reputation, it refuses to withdraw from the territories under its control. It argues that the war is closely linked to the influence of Islamists and remnants of the previous regime, a position that has featured in its rhetoric since the outbreak of the conflict. Through this narrative, the RSF presents itself as fighting against remnants of the former regime rather than simply seeking political and military power (Idris & Daqash, 2024). It also repeatedly portrays itself as a proponent of democracy and as a representative of deprived populations on the periphery. The positions of the two groups remain incompatible. Both continue to seek military victory, partly because they expect external support. This points to a gap between their stated commitment to negotiations and their actions on the ground, suggesting that their positions may serve strategic and rhetorical purposes rather than reflect a genuine willingness to reach a negotiated settlement.

Humanitarian Crisis and Shifting Territorial Control

According to the UN, Sudan has been experiencing the world's largest displacement, with almost 13 million people displaced; 8.6 million are internally displaced, and about 3.8 million have taken refuge in neighboring states (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2026). About 25 million people suffer from acute food insecurity, and about 638,000 people face famine (Brown, 2025). 80% of Sudan's healthcare system has collapsed, resulting in widespread cholera, malaria, and measles (International Organization for Migration, 2024).

Regarding territorial expansion, RSF captured most of Khartoum and Darfur in 2023, advanced into agricultural land in Gezira in 2024, and disrupted farming across Sudan. But SAF recaptured the southeast and Khartoum by March 2025. In October 2025, El Fasher, the last major city in Darfur held by the SAF and its allied joint forces, fell to the RSF after a prolonged siege. The RSF thus gained control of all of Darfur, signaling a de facto territorial partition of the country (Yizezew, 2025). The current conflict is not just a power struggle; it has seen different phases, from colonial-era center-periphery divisions and indirect rule, which empowered tribal leaders, to the systemic marginalization of peripheral regions through policy decisions like Arabization, to rebellions in different peripheries for inclusion, to the establishment of militias like the RSF to suppress those rebellions, which later became autonomous actors. These phases show that the current war is not new but a display of unresolved historical issues that have caused a recurring cycle of violence throughout Sudan's post-colonial history.

Possible Future Scenarios for Sudan

The worst-case scenario, continued war could lead to the partition of the state, an even more severe humanitarian catastrophe, and further regional destabilization. The state may split into two territories; the southern and western parts, including Darfur, would come under the rule of the RSF, while the SAF would rule the central, eastern, and northern parts of Sudan, including the Nile River (ACAPS, 2025). The economic outlook will worsen, with gross domestic product (GDP) potentially falling to 42% and seven million more people falling into poverty (Siddig, 2025). The humanitarian consequences would be even worse; an entire generation could be deprived of education and healthcare, temporary displacement could become permanent, and acute food insecurity could become chronic. The risk of regional spillover is already

present, and Sudan could increasingly become an arena for proxy competition among external powers.

The best-case scenario, by contrast, would involve establishing an inclusive power-sharing arrangement based on equitable resource distribution and political representation. This would require bringing the security apparatus under civilian control, demilitarizing the economy, and establishing accountability mechanisms for war crimes. Furthermore, marginalized communities, particularly those from Darfur, South Kordofan, and other peripheral regions, must have a meaningful role in political decision-making.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

The potential benefits of military triumph and control over state resources may be achieved through continued armed struggle, but the costs are far higher and include extreme humanitarian suffering, economic collapse, infrastructure devastation, and the persistence of structural causes of conflict. Although ceasefire agreements and elite power-sharing arrangements may reduce violence in the short term, they risk leaving underlying grievances unresolved, weakening accountability, and creating conditions for renewed instability (Kurtz, 2024). By encouraging inclusive governance, security sector reform, accountability, increased international investment, social reconciliation, and a more sustainable peace, a comprehensive, civilian-led political settlement, on the other hand, outweighs these costs in the long run. However, achieving such a settlement requires considerable time, international support, and mediation efforts. Overall, despite the greater resources and political commitment required in the short term, a civilian-led political settlement offers a more sustainable path towards addressing Sudan's conflict.

Pathways Towards Conflict Resolution

For the Sudan conflict, both immediate and long-term strategies are needed to end the war. In the short term, ensuring humanitarian relief, preventing famine, and safeguarding civilians through coordinated humanitarian operations should be the top priorities. In the medium term, international mediators should coordinate to prevent competing peace initiatives, and Sudanese civilians should be included in peace talks alongside the SAF and RSF. In the long term, achieving sustainable peace requires addressing the underlying causes of the conflict through equitable resource distribution, accountability for war crimes, inclusive governance, ending the marginalization of peripheral regions, and security sector reform under civilian leadership. To guarantee lasting peace and enhance the quality of life for the common citizen of Sudan, strong support from the international community, including arms embargoes and reconstruction aid, is also crucial.

Conclusion

By adopting the Wheel Model of Conflict Mapping and Analysis, this research examined the underlying causes, major players, goals, positions, interests, and current state of affairs of conflict in Sudan. It concluded that long-term institutional issues, dating back to the colonial era and persisting in post-independence Sudan, contributed to the violent escalation between the SAF and RSF in April 2023. The analysis identified interrelated structural factors: racialized policies of Arabization and Islamization, which marginalized non-Arab communities, and the marginalization of peripheral regions, in which political and economic power remained concentrated among the riverine Arab-Muslim elite while regions such as Darfur, South Kordofan,

Blue Nile, and South Sudan were historically marginalized and politically excluded. These disparities repeatedly sparked uprisings, while the formation of the Janjaweed, which later evolved into the RSF, demonstrated how state-sponsored militias could develop into autonomous armed actors capable of challenging state authority.

The paper also found that, despite public declarations of support for democracy and national unity, the SAF and RSF's true goals are to maintain political power, safeguard their economic empires, uphold military autonomy, and evade responsibility for grave human rights violations, including the genocide in Darfur and the 3 June 2019 massacre. This explains the failure of numerous peace talks. Additionally, the involvement of external actors, including the UAE, Egypt, Russia, Turkey, and Iran, has further internationalized the conflict, as these countries pursue their respective strategic interests in the Red Sea region, the Nile Basin, and the wider regional balance of power. Sudan's domestic turmoil has thus evolved into a complex regional dilemma. Furthermore, the human cost of these unsolved structural inequalities and political struggles is illustrated by the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Darfur, which has resulted in over 13 million displaced people and widespread hunger and famine. The research concludes that inclusive governance, fair resource distribution, civilian-run security sector reform, and accountability for past atrocities are the only ways to achieve sustainable peace. Regardless of which side achieves military control, cycles of marginalization, militarization, and violence will persist if these underlying problems are not addressed.

Therefore, the paper makes a twofold contribution. First, it provides a structured explanation of the recent war in Sudan by connecting its immediate causes and dynamics with the historical and structural roots of the conflict. Second, it contributes to the application of the Conflict Wheel model as a systematic analytical tool, offering researchers and practitioners a comprehensive framework for examining the conflict, assessing possible scenarios, and evaluating the potential of different strategies and options for conflict mitigation.

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