

Sudan as a Battleground for Foreign Interference

What Is at Stake for Europe?



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Executive summary

The civil war in Sudan should be seen not as a mere struggle for political hegemony, but as a focal point where broader regional rivalries, Iran's regional ambitions and, more broadly, the global competition between Russia, China and the West are played out.

The war has caused the world's largest humanitarian crisis. It has also settled into a stalemate between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), each backed by foreign sponsors. European attention has focused mostly on the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which supports the RSF. Yet the SAF and its associated Muslim Brotherhood militias also have foreign backers, namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Iran. Iran and Türkiye have ties with Islamist networks fighting alongside the army, including the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood, which the United States designated as a terrorist organisation in 2026.

The war is spreading across the Horn of Africa, where Ethiopia and Eritrea back opposite sides. The recent rift between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, over both Sudan and Yemen, has weakened mediation, while Russia and China hold back a broader UN arms embargo which the United States has been advocating for.

An outcome dominated by Islamist networks close to Iran would threaten Red Sea security, European trade, migration management and the fight against terrorism. Europe's credibility is also at stake, since European-made weapons sold to the UAE have reached the RSF. A focus on the RSF alone overlooks the other half of the war, including the Islamist networks that seek to return to power and the allegations of chemical weapons use by the SAF (see section 2.3). The EU should therefore apply the same standards to both sides and their respective sponsors.

The main recommendations are support for a UN arms embargo covering the whole of Sudan, renewed and expanded EU sanctions on both warring parties and on the networks that supply them, an assessment of the listing of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood at EU level, stronger controls on European arms exports, including after delivery, stronger monitoring of humanitarian aid and financial networks connected to Sudan and support for reconciliation between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

1 Introduction

The goal of this paper is to provide EU policymakers with an evidence-based analysis to inform decisions on Sudan. It analyses the role of external actors in the war and what it means for the European Union, at a critical moment. The UN sanctions regime on Sudan expires on 11 December 2026, the European Parliament has asked the Council to list entities linked to the Muslim Brotherhood where the legal criteria are met, and the Quad's mediation has stalled.

The document draws on open sources available up to 9 October 2026, including UN reports, analyses by research institutes, journalistic investigations by reliable newspapers, and official statements. Since the war is also fought through competing narratives, the paper grades the evidence on each actor on four levels, from established to unconfirmed (see section 4).

Section 2 outlines the context of the war. Section 3 examines the Islamist dimension, its main actors and the 2026 US designation. Section 4 maps the external actors and their interests, and section 5 analyses the rift between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Section 6 assesses the implications for the EU in five areas, and section 7 sets out recommendations linked to each of them.

2 General context

Civil war has been raging in Sudan since April 2023 with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) fighting each other at great cost to the civilian population. Sudan is currently facing the largest humanitarian emergency in the world, with 33.7 million people in need of humanitarian aid in 2026 according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.¹ Famine has been confirmed in El Fasher and Kadugli.² According to the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) as of August 2026, there were about 8.6 million internally displaced people. Another 4.7 million have crossed into neighbouring countries since the war began, mostly into Egypt, South Sudan and Chad. Libya has also become a major destination: UNHCR estimated some 255,000 Sudanese refugees in the country at the end of 2024, most of whom see it as a transit point on the Central Mediterranean route (see section 6.2).

KEY FIGURES

33.7 m

people in need of humanitarian aid (2026)

8.6 m

internally displaced people (Aug. 2026)

4.7 m

refugees in neighbouring countries

-49%

Bab el-Mandeb transits vs 2023 (Aug. 2026)

2.1 From transition to war

The Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces are former allies. In October 2021 they jointly staged a coup that ended the democratic transition launched after the civilian-led popular uprising that ousted Omar al-Bashir in April 2019. The RSF is a paramilitary force created by the al-Bashir regime. It was part of the state security apparatus until the war began.³ Army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as 'Hemedti', failed to agree on how to integrate the RSF into the regular army.⁴ Today the two forces fight for power and control separate parts of the country.

According to Washington, Sudanese Islamists also contributed to the outbreak of the war.^{5 6}

2.2 The course of the war

The military balance has shifted several times. In the first year the RSF had the upper hand. It took most of the capital and, by November 2023, four of the five state capitals in Darfur, its historic power base.⁷ The tide began to turn in the second half of 2024. Backed by allied militias⁸ and Iranian and Turkish drones, the army regained ground and retook Khartoum in March 2025. From May 2025, the RSF responded with long-range drone strikes on targets in the East, including Port Sudan.

In Darfur, El Fasher fell to the RSF in late October 2025 after an 18-month siege. It was the last SAF stronghold in North Darfur.⁹ A UN fact-finding mission found that the mass killings that followed bore the hallmarks of genocide. It identified an intent to destroy the Zaghawa and Fur communities "in whole or in part".¹⁰ Its 2024 report had already held both the SAF and the RSF, with their allied militias, responsible for serious abuses. These included blocking humanitarian aid to civilians.¹¹

2.3 Chemical weapons allegations against the SAF

In 2025 the United States determined that the Sudanese government, which is under army control, had used chemical weapons the previous year. It declared Sudan in breach of the Chemical Weapons Convention. Washington imposed sanctions in 2025 and again in 2026.¹² A France 24 investigation documented two attacks in September 2024 near the al-Jaili refinery, north of Khartoum. In both cases chlorine barrels were dropped from aircraft. Only the Sudanese army has such aircraft. Those treated after the attacks included civilians working at the refinery. The experts consulted by France 24 found the images consistent with chlorine attacks. They said definitive proof would require access to the sites.¹³ In September 2026, the Washington Post published materials provided by anonymous security officials. According to these materials, Sudan's security forces had stockpiled up to 290 chemical munitions. One document states that the main purpose of a new bomb design was "to conceal any evidence of the use of chemicals".¹⁴ Another document in the trove reviewed by the Washington Post indicates that the alleged head of the programme was assigned to the committee that al-Burhan announced in May 2025 to investigate allegations of chemical weapons use by the SAF, which later reported finding no evidence of chemical or radioactive contamination. Experts consulted by the Washington Post found the material to be credible. They said a definitive assessment would require access to the suspected sites and witnesses, which has not been granted since the war began.¹⁵ Sudanese officials, including al-Burhan, deny the allegations.

Following requests for clarification from Mauritania, Chad and Benin, the Executive Council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the body that monitors compliance with the Convention, has remained seized of the matter since 2025.¹⁶

2.4 A divided country



Figure 1. Sudan and neighbouring countries. Cities mentioned in the text.

The SAF and its government control Khartoum, the central Nile corridor and the east. Prime Minister Kamil Idris has led the government since May 2025. The army has moved the administration to Port Sudan, the country's main port and a strategic asset on the Red Sea. The RSF controls most of Darfur in the west and in 2025 it set up its own government in Nyala, which, however, is not recognised by the international community. Its supplies arrive through Chad and Libya. In April 2026 the front line ran through central and western Kordofan.¹⁷ El Obeid, the capital of North Kordofan, had been partly encircled by the RSF for about 18 months.¹⁸ Both governments claim to rule the whole of Sudan, which further exacerbates existing tensions.

At present, the conflict has settled into a stalemate sustained by external interference that fuels one side or the other.

This stalemate recalls the Libyan precedent of a country that is formally united but, in reality, divided between two centres of power backed by different external actors.

At the same time, the parties' dependence on external support limits their freedom of political action and ties the fate of the Sudanese state to the interests of third countries, undermining efforts towards a democratic transition.

2.5 Mediation efforts and malign external interference

Foreign backing for both sides has undermined every effort to end the fighting. With this support, both sides have chosen war over negotiation. Each believes it can win on the battlefield.¹⁹

The war already affects Chad, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Yemen. Ethiopia is already involved on the side of the RSF, while Eritrea backs the army: the real risk is now a direct conflict between the two countries (see sections 4.1 and 6.3).

The United States leads the main mediation effort through the Quad²⁰ that brings together the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. Egypt and Saudi Arabia support the SAF, while several sources point to the support of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for the RSF (see section 4).

The Quad agreed a roadmap towards a permanent ceasefire in September 2025. Fighting has nevertheless intensified. The SAF has resisted the US proposal, fearing that a truce would entrench RSF control over large areas. The rift between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which erupted in Yemen in December 2025, has deepened the stalemate in Sudan.²¹ Despite its efforts, the United States has not managed to bridge the differences among Quad members. The roadmap also leaves out key variables. These include the political weight of the SAF, the future of the RSF and the renewed influence of Sudanese Islamists.²² All three are essential to end the fighting and to manage the post-war period.

Sudan's dependence on external support is compounded by an internal one. Sudanese Islamists have been entrenched for decades within the political and security apparatus – particularly the army – and maintain links with international Islamist networks, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood. The militias currently fighting alongside the SAF will seek a role in the state. For them, a democratic transition would mean losing ground, and they therefore have every incentive to prevent it.

This creates a contradiction within the Quad itself. Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which are openly hostile to the Muslim Brotherhood, support an army that fights alongside an organisation the United States has designated as terrorist (see section 3.4).

3 The Islamist dimension

Islamist networks have been present in Sudan's institutions, security services and army for decades. This explains their weight in the current war. To assess their influence on power and on the prospects for peace, the actors must be kept apart. The label "Muslim Brotherhood" covers movements, parties and networks with a partly shared history, however their identities, leaders and interests differ. Treating them as one actor inevitably leads to wrong conclusions about who holds power and what they want.

3.1 Key terms and actors

In Sudan the Muslim Brotherhood current developed independently of the Egyptian movement. The organisations below share an origin in political Islam and the goal of a state based on sharia but differ in leaders and political choices.

Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood. The name figured in the 2026 US designation. It refers to the Sudanese Islamic Movement and its armed wing, the al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade (see section 3.4).²³

National Islamic Front (NIF). The movement was led by Hassan al-Turabi. It provided the political and civilian base for the 1989 coup.²⁴

National Congress Party (NCP). Omar al-Bashir's ruling party and the core of his regime. Al-Bashir founded it in 1998. It kept the Islamist origin but became mainly a party of power.²⁵

Popular Congress. The party al-Turabi founded after his split with al-Bashir in 1999–2001. It shares the same ideology as the NCP but was in opposition to al-Bashir.²⁶

Sudanese Islamic Movement. A dense network of former regime structures, now led by Ali Karti, al-Bashir's former foreign minister.²⁷ The 2026 US designation lists it as an alias of the "Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood".²⁸

These distinctions have practical consequences. A shared ideology does not mean a single leadership, a common position or converging political interests.

3.2 A common legacy, different paths

After the 1989 coup, the regime replaced civil servants and army officers with Islamist loyalists.²⁹ It also created the Popular Defence Forces (PDF), a paramilitary force that reported directly to the president. The PDF protected the regime and supported militias in the wars in the south and west. From 1997 Ali Karti was its national coordinator.³⁰

The ties between parts of the SAF and Islamist networks date back to this period. By 1993 the regime had dismissed about 1,500 officers, nearly a third of the officer corps. Officers close to the NIF replaced them.³¹ The Islamist presence in today's SAF is a legacy of this system, which survived al-Bashir's fall.³² The RSF came instead from the regime's militia strategy. From 2003 the government armed Arab militias in Darfur, known as the Janjaweed. In 2013 al-Bashir turned them into an official force under Hemedti.³³ The RSF is a creation of the Islamist regime, but it is not an Islamist force. Its political coalition calls for the exclusion of Islamists from politics.³⁴

The Islamist question is therefore a real line of division in the war, but it does not explain the war alone. On the army's side, militias and figures linked to the Islamic Movement and to the al-Bashir regime play an important role, but they are only one part of a broader coalition. On the other side, the RSF's political coalition rejects the Islamists, but the RSF itself was born of the same system and pursues

its own bid for power. The war is first of all a struggle for power between two former allies, in which Islamist networks are a key actor on one side.

3.3 The current scenario

The coalition backing the SAF includes former Darfur rebels grouped in the Joint Forces, the al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade, Sudan Shield, remnants of the PDF and of the former security services, and local militias. Only some of these groups have links to the NCP or the Islamic Movement. Islamist figures also sit in the Port Sudan government formed in 2025. Civilian Prime Minister Kamil Idris leads it under SAF oversight, alongside technocrats and other army allies.³⁵

3.4 The US designation and why it matters for the EU

On 9 March 2026 Washington designated the “Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood” as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist and announced its intent to designate it as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, effective 16 March 2026.³⁶ According to the US government, the organisation is composed of the Sudanese Islamic Movement, led by Ali Karti, and its armed wing, the al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade.³⁷ The designation lists both as aliases of the same organisation.³⁸ The US government says it has supplied more than 20,000 fighters to the war, many of them trained or supported by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.³⁹

For the EU, the US designation matters for a practical reason. In 2024 the EU sanctioned Ali Karti, the leader of the Islamic Movement, for obstructing the democratic transition and ceasefire efforts.⁴⁰ The US designation offers a model and a factual basis to move from sanctioning one person to targeting the Sudanese Islamic Movement he leads.

There are good reasons to take this step. As noted in section 2.1, these networks weakened the civilian transition. Today they are among the main obstacles to peace, because a negotiated settlement and a civilian government would reduce their political and military power.⁴¹ As long as they can block an agreement, the war will continue.

A longer war also has direct costs for Europe, in terms of humanitarian aid and migration (see section 6.2).

The political ground for such a step already exists in Europe. In January 2026 the French National Assembly called for the Muslim Brotherhood to be added to the EU terrorist list, and in March 2026 the lower house of the Dutch parliament called for a ban of the Brotherhood in the Netherlands. On 8 October 2026 the European Parliament called on the Council to include entities and individuals linked to the Brotherhood on the EU terrorist list, where the legal criteria are met.⁴²

4 Mapping of external actors

The sources point to many external actors with different and sometimes conflicting interests. The table below divides them into primary and secondary actors. Within each group, it orders them by the side they support. For each actor it shows the type of support and the level of corroboration. It shows the strategic interest only when the source states it explicitly. Primary actors are those whose support or strategic weight affects the course of the war or the international tools to end it. Secondary actors play a more limited role, often linked to geographic proximity and the transit of supplies.

The table uses four levels of corroboration:

LEVELS OF EVIDENCE

Established.	Verified by a body mandated by the UN Security Council.
Credible.	Documented by research institutes, NGOs or investigative journalism based on documents, data or images.
Reported.	Attributed to diplomatic sources or interviews the reader cannot verify.
Unconfirmed.	A claim with no public evidence.

Actor	Type of support	Level	Interest stated in the source
PRIMARY ACTORS			
Egypt	Political; drone strikes on RSF supply lines; military advisers	Credible	Interests in the Nile basin; stability of the southern border
Türkiye	TB2 drones and warheads (deliveries worth at least USD 120 million in 2024) Political support: al-Burhan's visit to Türkiye; recognition of al-Burhan as head of state.	Credible	Ties with Islamist factions; Red Sea presence; competition with the UAE
Saudi Arabia	Political and economic, growing since 2025	Credible	Security of Port Sudan and the Red Sea coast
Iran	Drones; training of Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood fighters, according to the US government	Credible	Not stated
PRIMARY ACTORS – SUPPORTING THE RSF			
UAE	Financial, military and logistical; Colombian contractors; weapons	Credible	Guarantees that the army distances itself from the Islamic Movement
Ethiopia	Training camp for RSF fighters; transit of supplies	Credible	Rivalry with Egypt and Eritrea
Russia	2017–2023 weapons to the RSF in exchange for gold, via Wagner. Later closer ties with the SAF over a naval base	Credible	Access to gold mines; naval base on the Red Sea
China	Weapons (e.g.: drones) re-exported to the RSF via the UAE; opposes broadening UN sanctions	Credible	Not stated
SECONDARY ACTORS – SUPPORTING SAF			
Qatar	Political	Reported	Not stated
Eritrea	Militia training	Reported	Security of its western border
Pakistan	Proposed sale of weapons and jets, brokered by Saudi Arabia	Reported	Not stated
SECONDARY ACTORS – SUPPORTING THE RSF			
Libya / Haftar's LNA	Supply routes; ammunition from southern Libya	Established (ammunition flow); Credible (LNA role)	Not stated
Chad	Transit territory for supplies (allegations deemed credible by the UN Panel)	Credible	Not stated
SECONDARY ACTORS – NO DOCUMENTED SUPPORT			
South Sudan	No government support; fuel smuggling route involving local officers	Established	Not stated

4.1 Primary actors

The sources show that Egypt, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Iran support the SAF. All four recognise al-Burhan as head of state.⁴³

These four countries do not share the same agenda. Egypt and Saudi Arabia have long been hostile to the Muslim Brotherhood. Iran and Türkiye, instead, have ties with Islamist networks. What unites them is geopolitics more than ideology: the Red Sea, the Nile and the fear of an RSF-controlled state on their borders or on the opposite shore.

Egypt sees the army as the best partner to protect its interests in the Nile basin and the stability of its southern border.⁴⁴ According to the Critical Threats Project, Cairo stepped up its support after the RSF consolidated control of western Sudan in late 2025. This included drone strikes on RSF supply lines and military advisers.⁴⁵

Türkiye is one of the best-documented cases. A Washington Post investigation revealed the delivery of eight drones and hundreds of warheads to the SAF procurement agency, which was already under US sanctions. The Turkish embassy in Washington says that Türkiye has refrained from any military support to the parties.⁴⁶ In December 2025, President Erdoğan received al-Burhan in Türkiye.⁴⁷

Several sources also document Iran's involvement, in particular the supply of drones.⁴⁸ According to the US government, Iran's Revolutionary Guards have trained or supported many Islamic Sudanese fighters.⁴⁹

Iran is exploiting the contradiction within the Quad (see section 2.5), returning to a country where it had already forged an alliance with the Islamist regime in the 1990s.⁵⁰ The Revolutionary Guards' approach towards Islamist networks is opportunistic. When it serves its strategic goals, Iran supports Sunni Islamist movements: it has long backed Hamas, which originates from the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵¹ Even inside Shia Iran, a Brotherhood-inspired organisation can operate legally, within the limits set by the Islamic Republic.⁵²

Today, Sudan offers Iran a foothold on the African shore of the Red Sea, opposite Yemen, and a chance to extend its alliance network into Africa. With a presence on both shores, Tehran would have direct leverage over one of the world's most important trade routes. The war between Iran, the United States and Israel, with the resulting closure of the Strait of Hormuz, showed the consequences of Iranian control over key trade and logistics hubs. The main alternative route for Gulf oil passes through the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, within range of Houthi missiles.⁵³ The Red Sea is therefore not a separate route but the bypass for Hormuz. This means that if Tehran could count on an allied country on the African shore of the Red Sea, it would have an additional lever and could put pressure on two chokepoints at the same time.

Saudi Arabia first presented itself as a mediator. It appears to have strengthened its support for the SAF after RSF drone strikes in 2025 on Port Sudan and the Red Sea coast. Riyadh considers these areas vital to its national security. Its support has taken the form of commercial and cooperation agreements with the Port Sudan authorities.⁵⁴

Several sources point to UAE support for the RSF, with different levels of evidence. In 2024 the UN Panel of Experts found credible, based on sources in Chad and Darfur, the allegations that cargo planes from Abu Dhabi carried weapons and ammunition delivered to the RSF through Amdjarass airport in Chad.⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch (2026) reports that a private Abu Dhabi-based security company, licensed to work for the Emirati government, appears to have recruited Colombian contractors, who were later deployed with the RSF.⁵⁶ HRW also documents weapons sold to the Emirati armed forces

by Serbian, Bulgarian and French manufacturers that ended up with the RSF. It notes that the exact route is unknown. In two cases the transfer may have taken place before April 2023, when the RSF was still part of the state security apparatus and had been deployed in Yemen alongside the Saudi-led coalition, which included the UAE.⁵⁷ Taken together, the findings point to UAE involvement in supporting the RSF.

The UAE government denies any involvement. In its reply to the Panel, the UAE Permanent Mission to the UN said the flights to Amdjarass carried humanitarian aid, in 122 flights with 2,500 tonnes of supplies.⁵⁸ In a December 2025 statement, the UAE Embassy in Washington argued that the Panel's latest report, published in April 2025, contains no substantiated evidence of Emirati support for the RSF. It called for an arms embargo covering all of Sudan.⁵⁹ For Abu Dhabi, the war is also a way to prevent the return of Islamist networks to power: it seeks guarantees that the army will distance itself from the Islamic Movement.⁶⁰

Ethiopia has also become involved in the war on the RSF side. In February 2026, a Reuters investigation found that Ethiopia was hosting a camp in the Benishangul-Gumuz region to train RSF fighters.⁶¹ The investigation, based on satellite imagery and internal documents, provides the first direct evidence of Ethiopia's involvement in the war. According to the Critical Threats Project, its territory is also one of the routes the UAE uses to supply the RSF.⁶²

Russia does not fit clearly into either camp. Between 2017 and 2023, through the Wagner Group and the company Meroe Gold, it supported the RSF, including with military supplies, in exchange for access to Sudanese gold.⁶³ An estimated 32.7 tonnes of gold left the country between February 2022 and February 2023.⁶⁴ After 2023, the Kremlin moved closer to the SAF to secure a naval base in Port Sudan.⁶⁵ The Russian and Sudanese foreign ministers announced the agreement in February 2025.⁶⁶ The sources consulted document Wagner's support to the RSF until 2023, but no direct military supplies by the Russian state to either side in the current war.

Russia appears to maintain an opportunistic approach, exploiting the instability to pursue objectives such as access to resources, the expansion of its influence and a permanent presence on the Red Sea. This opportunism is also shown by its shift from supporting the RSF to engaging with the army, as expediency dictates. Europe has already encountered this pattern in Libya and the Sahel and, in different forms, faces it again in Ukraine.

China's role appears more indirect, but no less significant. Beijing does not appear to be directly involved in the conflict, yet Chinese-made drones operated by the UAE have reportedly supported the RSF.⁶⁷ In the Security Council, China backed only short technical renewals of the sanctions regime and, like Russia, opposed broadening it, arguing that expanding coercive measures would worsen the humanitarian situation.⁶⁸ This position is holding back, among other measures, the extension of the arms embargo to the whole of Sudan, one of the few multilateral instruments available. Europe has already encountered this convergence on other issues and, in this case too, it limits the international community's ability to contain the war. From this perspective, Sudan should be seen not as a peripheral crisis, but as yet another front in the competition with powers whose objectives conflict with European interests.

4.2 Secondary actors

Eritrea also supports the SAF. It has trained militias to secure its western border and to stop the RSF from advancing further east.⁶⁹ Qatar provides political support to the army.⁷⁰ Pakistan also appears among the SAF's potential suppliers. In January 2026 Reuters reported that Islamabad was close to a USD 1.5 billion deal to supply weapons and jets to Sudan, brokered by Saudi Arabia.⁷¹ In April 2026

Pakistan put the deal on hold, after Saudi Arabia asked for it to be terminated and said it would not finance it.⁷² On the RSF side, Chad is mainly a transit country, while Libya is also a source of supplies. Amdjarass airport in eastern Chad was allegedly used for arms deliveries to the RSF (see section 4.1). Chad did not reply to the Panel's request for clarification.⁷³ The same report found that two brigades of Haftar's LNA in southern Libya helped supply the RSF with fuel, vehicles and ammunition.⁷⁴ According to the Small Arms Survey, the LNA continues to support the RSF within a network built with UAE help.⁷⁵ South Sudan supports neither side. A fuel smuggling route to Darfur involved some local officers, but according to the Panel the government played no role.⁷⁶

5 The rift between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates

Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE both belong to the Quad, they are accused of backing opposite sides in the war. In November 2025, during a visit to the White House, Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman asked President Trump for US engagement to end the conflict, according to Trump's own account.⁷⁷ A month later the rift between the two countries broke into the open in Yemen. Saudi Arabia intervened militarily to stop an offensive by UAE-backed Yemeni forces in Hadramawt, a region bordering the kingdom. The UAE then withdrew its forces from Yemen. According to senior Gulf officials, the crisis in Yemen grew out of tensions over Sudan, and the UAE backed the offensive in Hadramawt in response to the Saudi request for US engagement on Sudan. The same officials say that Abu Dhabi believes Riyadh asked Washington to sanction the backers of the RSF, namely the UAE. Saudi Arabia denies this. The UAE denies any role in the offensive and any link between Yemen and Sudan.⁷⁸ The rift also weighs on mediation. Al-Burhan rejected the Quad peace plan because of the UAE's participation, which he considers biased. He praised instead the Saudi call for US diplomatic engagement.⁷⁹

Sudan also reflects the new balance of power taking shape in the Gulf, where Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, once allies, are now rivals. The Makkah Joint Defence Agreement of August 2026, through which Riyadh formally aligned itself with Türkiye and Pakistan, deepens this rift. With Türkiye also among the SAF's backers,⁸⁰ external support for the army is coalescing into a political bloc, while the UAE appears increasingly isolated alongside the RSF. The paradox is that the mediators are themselves involved in the conflict, and until Riyadh and Abu Dhabi reach an understanding, no agreement on Sudan is likely to hold. In September 2026 the UAE vice president visited Riyadh, the first such visit since the crisis began. The visit marked a first step towards rapprochement, although tensions persist.⁸¹

The paradox is that the mediators are themselves involved in the conflict, and until Riyadh and Abu Dhabi reach an understanding, no agreement on Sudan is likely to hold.

— Section 5

6 Implications for the European Union

The war in Sudan has caused the humanitarian crisis with the largest number of people in need in the world, as well as grave human rights violations. For the European Union, however, the conflict is not only a humanitarian and human rights issue. It directly affects European interests in five areas.

For the European Union, the persistence of this situation entails concrete and interlinked risks. The consolidation of a government with a strong Islamist component, backed from abroad by countries such as Iran, Türkiye and Qatar, would have consequences for Sudan, for the region and for European security. Islamist networks close to the Revolutionary Guards would make Sudan part of the array of armed groups that Iran supports from Lebanon to Yemen, increasing the risks of radicalisation, jihadism and terrorism in Europe's neighbourhood. This could also strengthen the transnational Islamist networks already operating in Europe.

At the same time, such a development – as well as an extension of the conflict to neighbouring countries, or their inability to continue hosting refugees – could trigger new waves of migration towards the Mediterranean.

Security in the Red Sea – a vital route for European trade, already affected by Houthi attacks – would also be compromised in the long term by the destabilisation of the Sudanese coast and by a hostile presence on both shores, with direct economic consequences for Europe.

These risks also have a strategic dimension. European disengagement would leave the field open to initiatives by Russia, Iran and China, leading to a further loss of influence in Africa and the risk that Sudan could become a channel for circumventing European sanctions. In our assessment, this risk is concrete: the gold exports documented by Larsen and Wivel⁸² took place in the first year after the invasion of Ukraine.

6.1 Red Sea security and trade routes

Sudan lies on the stretch of the Red Sea that leads to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. This trade route remains fragile. In August 2026, transits through the strait were 49% below 2023 levels.⁸³ In late September, EU High Representative Kaja Kallas said that Aspides, the EU naval operation protecting shipping in the Red Sea, needs more ships to meet the many requests for escort.⁸⁴ Continued fighting on the African shore of the Red Sea, where foreign powers compete for influence, would add to the instability and raise the cost of the European effort. The risk grows if hostile powers gain a foothold on the Sudanese coast. Iran already supports the Houthis on the other side of the strait, and Russia seeks a naval base in Port Sudan (see section 4). Their presence would increase the threat to shipping and the cost of European trade. When the Houthi attacks forced ships to sail around Africa, transit times between Asia and Europe grew by 10 to 14 days.⁸⁵ A crisis on the Red Sea and Hormuz routes at the same time would have a much higher cost for Europe, whose trade with Asia passes mainly through Suez.

6.2 Migration

Neighbouring countries host most of the people who have fled Sudan (see section 2). Assistance there is often insufficient. The refugee component of the 2026 humanitarian plan is only 18% funded.⁸⁶ Without aid or prospects in first host countries, a growing share of refugees moves on. Arrivals of Sudanese nationals in Europe have risen sharply. They made up 12% of arrivals in the European Mediterranean in the first quarter of 2026 alone.⁸⁷ The EU already bears part of the cost. The European

Commission is the second-largest donor to the 2026 humanitarian plan, which remains less than half funded.⁸⁸ Without a political solution, these costs will rise.

6.3 Regional spillover in the Horn of Africa

Ethiopia and Eritrea stand on opposite sides of the war. Ethiopia, backed by the UAE, hosts a training camp for RSF fighters (see section 4.1). Eritrea and Egypt, Addis Ababa's main rivals, support the Sudanese army. Renewed fighting in northern Ethiopia in late September 2026 and the break in diplomatic relations between Addis Ababa and Asmara make an interstate conflict a real risk. Ethiopia's army commander has accused Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt of backing the rebels. Since Addis Ababa and the Tigrayan rebels have ties to opposite sides in Sudan, the fighting could also spread to the Sudan–Ethiopia border.⁸⁹ Chad is a transit route for RSF supplies⁹⁰ and one of the main host countries for Sudanese refugees.⁹¹ The war now divides its ruling elite. Part of the Zaghawa community, the president's own group, resents his alleged support for the RSF.⁹² For the EU, the risk is that Sudan becomes the point where the crises of the Horn of Africa and the Sahel merge. This region borders the Red Sea trade routes and is a source of migration to Europe.

6.4 Islamist networks and external sponsors

A further risk for Europe is that an Islamist model of government, backed by hostile actors, with Iran first among them, takes root in a key country of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. These networks operate on the army's side. The coalition backing the SAF includes militias and figures from the Islamic Movement, which the United States has designated as a terrorist organisation. According to Washington, many of its fighters receive training and support from Iran's Revolutionary Guards.⁹³ For a Europe that works to prevent and counter radicalisation, a state permeated by networks that use jihadist rhetoric and keep a channel to Tehran is a direct threat.

The picture is more complex than Islamists against non-Islamists, given the origins of both sides (see section 3.2). Islamist networks are only part of the army's camp. Its external coalition is broader than that of the RSF and goes well beyond Islamist actors (see section 4). The RSF appears to rely mainly on the UAE and holds European-made weapons.⁹⁴ This puts Europe in an unusual position. It bears the consequences of the war but also has direct relations with those who fuel it.

European attention has so far focused mainly on the UAE. This is partly justified by the results of the UN Panel of Experts, but it should not hide the other side. Among the sponsors of the SAF, Iran and Türkiye have ties with Islamist networks, and, according to Washington, Iran's Revolutionary Guards train many of the fighters of the movement that the United States designated as terrorist. If the EU applies scrutiny only to the RSF's sponsors, it could create the same inconsistency that it wants to avoid.

The same imbalance can be seen in some of the advocacy addressed to EU institutions. A recent example is the letter that Amnesty International sent to the President of the European Commission on 21 August 2026.⁹⁵ The letter rightly documents the crimes committed by the RSF in North Darfur and the threat to El Obeid, and several of its requests, such as a nationwide ceasefire and the extension of the UN arms embargo to the whole of Sudan, apply to all parties. However, it does not describe any abuses attributed to the SAF and its allied militias, and the only foreign backer it names is the UAE, to which all its country-specific requests are addressed. Organisations such as Amnesty play an essential role in documenting violations in Sudan. Yet in a war fought across the whole country, all parties and their sponsors need to be examined with the same rigour, and the EU should apply this standard to the input it receives.

6.5 Global competition, supply chains and EU credibility

Recent experience shows that the EU's credibility in the region depends on the consistency of its policies.

The first precedent concerns Sudan itself. Under the Khartoum Process, launched in 2014, the EU funded cooperation with the Sudanese government to curb migration towards Europe. The government gave the RSF control of the migration routes.⁹⁶ A policy designed only to manage migration ended up strengthening one of the two sides now at war.

The second precedent is the Sahel, where Europe has lost influence to Russia. The Wagner network contributed to this loss through disinformation campaigns that portrayed Europe as an enemy of African countries.⁹⁷

In Sudan too, Wagner provided material support to the RSF. Its role declined after the death of its founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, in 2023.⁹⁸ Haftar's LNA in Libya still supplies the RSF with fuel and ammunition.⁹⁹ The crises in the Sahel, Libya and Sudan are linked by a network of actors that Europe meets on several fronts.

There is a problem of coherence that directly affects Europe. The presence within the RSF of European weapons sold to the UAE¹⁰⁰ shows that end-user controls stop at the point of sale. The Union should therefore establish a mechanism to track weapons beyond delivery, based on post-shipment checks and the EU-wide suspension of licences to countries responsible for documented diversions. To be credible, the mechanism must apply equally to all suppliers to the warring parties and extend to candidate countries, including Serbia, from which some of the weapons originate, and Türkiye, from which drones bound for the SAF were shipped.¹⁰¹ Sudan is therefore also an issue that affects the EU's enlargement policy and its credibility in calling on other actors to stop fuelling the conflict.

Three lessons follow. First, a European policy focused only on containing migration risks strengthening armed actors who then fuel conflict. Second, applying different pressure to the sponsors of each side gives Europe's rivals an easy argument to portray it as biased. Third, Europe needs to know where its own products end up. The recommendations below start from this premise.

7 Policy recommendations

7.1 Recommendations for the European Union

Arms embargo. Advocate for the extension of the UN arms embargo to the whole of Sudan and support stronger mechanisms for its monitoring and enforcement. Intensify efforts to identify, investigate and hold accountable individuals, entities, countries and networks involved in violating or circumventing the embargo, including through illicit arms transfers, financing and intermediary networks.

Islamist networks. In light of the European Parliament's 2026 Resolution on the Muslim Brotherhood, the Council should undertake a thorough assessment of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood, along with its aliases, including the Sudanese Islamic Movement and the al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade, which the US Treasury already sanctioned in September 2025. Additionally, it should also consider adding them to the EU's existing sanctions regime on Sudan. The EU has previously utilised this regime in 2024 to impose sanctions on Ali Karti, the leader of the Islamic Movement (risk 6.4).

Iran and the Revolutionary Guards. Treat Sudan as part of the EU's policy towards Iran, not as a separate file. Include the activity of the Revolutionary Guards in Sudan in the EU's assessment of Iran's regional role (risks 6.1 and 6.4).

Diplomatic conditionality. In the dialogue with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Chad and the UAE, ask each country to end military support to the parties. Engage Qatar, which provides political support to the army, on the same objective. Recall to Türkiye that, as a candidate country, it is expected to align with EU foreign policy (risk 6.4).

Export and end-use controls. Set up an EU mechanism to track weapons beyond delivery, based on post-shipment checks and the EU-wide suspension of licences to countries responsible for documented diversions. Apply it equally to all suppliers and extend it to candidate countries. Strengthen end-use checks on dual-use goods so that European products do not reach the warring parties (risk 6.5).

Russia and China. Monitor gold flows from Sudan as a possible channel to evade sanctions on Russia. Raise with China, a state party to the Arms Trade Treaty, the diversion of its weapons to Sudan (risks 6.1 and 6.5).

Red Sea. Include the Sudanese coast in the EU's assessment of Red Sea security, as the Red Sea is also the bypass route for Hormuz. Reinforce Aspides, as requested by the High Representative (risk 6.1).

Support for first-asylum countries. Increase support for neighbouring host countries to ease the pressure that drives some refugees to move on to Europe (risk 6.2).

7.2 Recommendations for the international community, with EU support

Support for the Quad. Encourage reconciliation between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Ask that the roadmap explicitly address the future of the RSF and the role of Islamist networks. Both could cause any agreement to fail. Ask that civilian representatives take part in the peace process. Take into account the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement between Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan, which deepens the rift, as discussed in section 5 (risks 6.3 and 6.4). Encourage all Quad members to align behind the roadmap agreed in September 2025.

Support for the UN Panel of Experts. Through EU member states on the Security Council, ask Chad to grant the Panel access to its border areas with Darfur. The Panel's request has gone unanswered.¹⁰² Support a Panel mandate that gives equal attention to all parties and their suppliers. Offer EU expertise on sanctions monitoring, based on its experience with sanctions on Russia (risks 6.3 and 6.5).

OPCW investigation. Support a technical investigation into allegations of chemical weapons use by the SAF.

Extended arms embargo. Support in the Security Council the extension of the arms embargo to the whole of Sudan before the sanctions regime expires on 11 December 2026.¹⁰³ China and Russia have spoken against broadening the measures.¹⁰⁴ The embargo should apply equally to all parties and suppliers. It should come with a Panel mandate covering the country (risks 6.4 and 6.5).

Independent investigations and humanitarian aid. Support independent investigations by international organisations and NGOs into abuses by all warring parties and their militias. Strengthen monitoring so that humanitarian aid reaches civilians and is not diverted by any armed actor, including Islamist networks, to gain control or legitimacy (risks 6.2 and 6.4).

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