

Why is there no international military mission in Sudan?

Oscar Fröberg

Sudan has been in a state of open war since April 2023, resulting in a profound humanitarian disaster and heightened regional instability. It is a complex situation shaped both by domestic challenges, such as political and military fragmentation, competition over resources, and mass displacement, and by geopolitical dynamics driven by external actors and their competing interests. The conflict has been called “the forgotten war,” and despite ongoing massacres there has been no concerted international or regional effort to intervene.

THIS FOI MEMO discusses the difficulties of organizing an international military mission in Sudan. It opens with a concise overview of the principal warring parties, the internal and historic dynamics that have led to the current conflict, and the domestic challenges that shape Sudan’s present situation, ending with a discussion of the prospects for an international mission.

SAF AND RSF

The war in Sudan is being fought by two major forces, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The RSF was created by the former president Omar al-Bashir, who had successfully held on to power for three decades. Part of this success was his ability to avoid military coups, which, ironically, was the method he used himself to become head of Sudan. During the conflict in Darfur in the early 2000s, Bashir used a paramilitary group called the Janjaweed to crush the resistance of rebel groups by attacking their villages, displacing civilians, pillaging, and more. The Janjaweed consisted of Arab tribes that mainly attacked non-Arab tribes. The method proved effective for Bashir, and the Janjaweed were also more mobile than the regular forces (SAF). In 2013, Bashir transformed the Janjaweed into an official unit of Sudan’s military armed forces, which became the RSF. They were a counterforce to the SAF, minimising the threat of military coups, as the RSF served as Bashir’s own guard.¹

In December 2018, large protests emerged in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, which eventually led to the ousting of the country’s long-time ruler, Omar al-Bashir, in April 2019, after 30 years of rule. Bashir was arrested by the Sudanese army and a three-month state of emergency was imposed. There were two key figures behind the military intervention: General Abdel-Fattah Burhan, leader of SAF, and General Muhammed Hamdan Dagalo, generally referred to as “Hemedti,” leader of the paramilitary RSF. Burhan became the new de facto leader of the state’s transitional military authority, known as the Transitional Military Council (TMC), while Hemedti became its deputy chairman. They promised a transition to civilian rule but took very little action to achieve this. During a sit-down protest outside the army headquarters in June 2019, more than 120 people were killed by the RSF. This was a pivotal moment and an example of Hemedti’s coercive power that would become evident in the coming years.² As a result of intense international mediation and pressure from the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Ethiopia, and the African Union, a Constitutional Declaration was signed later that year and a Sovereign Council was formed with 11 members: five military, five civilian, and one jointly chosen. Burhan was chairman, Hemedti deputy, and a civilian Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdok, was appointed. However, in 2021 the two generals staged a coup, dissolving the Sovereign

1 Lindén, K. (2024). *Civil war in Sudan: A struggle for political power and economic interests* (FOI Studies in African Security; FOI Memo 8661). FOI – Swedish Defence Research Agency; Ray, M. (November 2025). Janjaweed. Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Janjaweed>.

2 Human Rights Watch (17 November 2019). “They were shouting ‘Kill them!’”: Sudan’s violent crackdown on protesters in Khartoum. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/11/18/they-were-shouting-kill-them/sudans-violent-crackdown-protesters-khartoum>.



Map 1. Karta över Sudan med angränsande länder. Skapad av Patric Karlsson (FOI).

Källa: Esri, GEBCO, Garmin, NaturalVue.

Council and arresting Hamdok and other civilians. Burhan became the de facto head of state, while Hemedti remained deputy, and when negotiations on how the RSF could be integrated into SAF took place, Hemedti resisted. Tension grew and both parties began to arm and redeploy forces. In April 2023, open war erupted between the two, leaving the civilians in the middle, resulting in what is currently the world's largest ongoing humanitarian catastrophe.³

DOMESTIC AND HISTORIC DYNAMICS

Sudan has been a war-torn country for many decades, with the civil war between the north and the south, which resulted in the secession of South Sudan, as well as conflicts in the Darfur region in western Sudan. The conflict in Darfur stretched over several decades, in the 1980s, '90s,

and '00s. During this time, the world witnessed horrendous atrocities committed by the government of Sudan, which also led the International Criminal Court to issue arrest warrants for the then-president of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir, in 2009 and 2010, with several counts of *crimes against humanity*, *war crimes*, and *genocide*, committed at least between 2003 and 2004.⁴

The charges put words to the history of atrocities that have taken place in Sudan over the last decades. One of the counts above was *forcible transfer*, which was due to the Sudanese government's strategy of using the Janjaweed militia to clear villages of non-Arab tribes. Later in 2007, the government began to accommodate more loyal Sahelian Arab tribes migrating into Darfur from Libya and Chad, by supplying them with free passports and land in

³ UNICEF (24 October 2025). *Sudan is the world's largest humanitarian crisis—And children are paying the highest price* [Press release]. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/sudan-worlds-largest-humanitarian-crisis-and-children-are-paying-highest-price%C2%A0>.

⁴ *Prosecutor v. Omar Hassan Ahmad Al Bashir*, ICC-02/05-01/09 (International Criminal Court). Retrieved from <https://www.icc-cpi.int/darfur/albashir>.

Darfur. This land was inhabited by other groups who were forced to leave.⁵ The migration was not all due to the politics of the Sudanese government, but was also an effect of climate change and the expansion of the Sahara Desert.

The majority of Arab tribes in Darfur, eastern Chad, and southern Libya rely on pastoralism, hence the need to move and find pastureland and water for the livestock, following the seasons of the year, whereas many non-Arab communities derive their livelihoods primarily from sedentary agriculture.⁶ With climate change and Arab nomadic tribes encouraged by the Bashir regime to migrate into Darfur, the region's population expanded rapidly, from roughly one million in the 1950s to about 6.5 million by the 2000s.⁷ This transformation unfolded simultaneously with growing demand for sheep in the Gulf states and, as of today, pastoralism is the predominant form of livestock production in Sudan, making it a significant contributor to the national economy.⁸ Competition grew as land available to feed livestock shrank and, with ongoing tensions and conflicts, the herders have been forced to adapt. As a result, herds now move over shorter distances, and competition for grazing zones among pastoralists has increased.⁹

INTERNATIONAL MILITARY MISSIONS IN SUDAN

During the current war, there have been several proposals for intervention in Sudan. To begin with, the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) was deployed to Khartoum in 2020 to support the political transition and Sudan's progress towards democratic governance, after Omar al-Bashir was deposed. The mission hit its first major obstacle when General Burhan and Hemedti jointly carried out a coup and overthrew the government, in 2021. When the war erupted

between the RSF and SAF, General Burhan blamed the special envoy of UNITAMS, Volker Perthes, for the violence and also made him *persona non grata*, as General Burhan accused Perthes of not respecting Sudan's sovereignty.¹⁰ Shortly after, General Burhan demanded UNITAMS' full withdrawal.¹¹ Later in the war, the UN Human Rights Council (OHCHR) established a fact-finding mission in Sudan the same year that the war broke out.¹² However, the military-led government has rejected the proposals and recommendations of the mission, calling OHCHR "a political and illegal body."¹³

The history of international intervention in Sudan has proved difficult. A major example of this is the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) which was established in 2004. The mission had limitation in resources and was too small in order to reach its goals.¹⁴ The AMIS was therefore reinforced by the UN in 2007. The new mission came to be known as the African Union–United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), which was the first operation of its kind, and also was among the largest and most expensive of its time.¹⁵ Its core mandate was to protect civilians, but since the conflict had erupted four years prior to the launch of UNAMID, 300,000 people had already died. In hindsight, the mission was deployed too late, and when it was adopted, the deployment of troops took too long. Although it was one of the largest missions in the world, the Darfur region was too large to manage or control.¹⁶

The crisis in Darfur illustrates how international protection efforts fail when mandate design, internal conflict dynamics, and geopolitical conditions do not align. The international community recognised the severity of the atrocities by 2005, when genocide and war crimes

5 Natsios, A. S. (2012). Sudan, South Sudan, and Darfur: What everyone needs to know. Oxford University Press.

6 Qadir, H. (2021). Reducing pastoralism-related violence in the Sudano-Sahel. Peace Direct. https://peaceinsight.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/Hanna_Sudan_Research_Paper_.pdf.

7 (Natsios, 2012)

8 Sulieman, H. M., and Young, H. (2023). The resilience and adaptation of pastoralist livestock mobility in protracted conflict settings: West Darfur, Sudan. *Nomadic Peoples*, 27(1), 3–31. <https://doi.org/10.3197/np.2023.270102>

9 Sulieman and Young, The resilience and adaptation.

10 Deutsche Welle. (2023, June 9). Sudan declares UN envoy 'persona non grata'. <https://www.dw.com/en/sudan-declares-un-envoy-persona-non-grata/a-65864756>

11 News Agencies. (2 December 2023). Security Council agrees to terminate UN mission in Sudan. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/2/security-council-agrees-to-terminate-un-mission-in-sudan>.

12 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (n.d.). *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffm-sudan/index>.

13 Chothia, F. (2024, September 8). Sudan rejects UN call for peace force to protect civilians. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c93pv3z36dxo>.

14 Ekengård, A. (2008). *The African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS): Experiences and lessons learned* (FOI-R--2559--SE). FOI – Swedish Defence Research Agency. <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--2559--SE>

15 Rodriguez, R. M. (2024). UNAMID and MONUSCO: The two most expensive UN peacekeeping operations—How close are they to achieving their objectives? *World Mediation*. (Original work published 2015). <https://worldmediation.org/unamid-and-monusco-the-two-most-expensive-un-peacekeeping-operations-how-close-are-they-to-achieve-their-objectives/>.

16 Brown, W. (2021, March 17). *UNAMID: A retrospective*. *The World Mind*. <https://www.theworldmind.org/deepdive-archive/2021/3/17/unamid-a-retrospective>

were acknowledged and external pressure for intervention increased. Yet, despite the emergence of mandates and appeals to “never again,” action remained slow, fragmented, and ultimately insufficient to prevent widespread civilian harm.

UNAMID is an example of why these failures occurred in practice. The core issue is that political consent from the host state, regional legitimacy, and adequate resources must align; without this convergence, even strong mandates fail. In Darfur, all three elements diverged: Sudan resisted, the region was split, and resources were inadequate. This mismatch is why promises from strong mandates could not be realised in operational terms.¹⁷

With vivid memories of UNAMID, any future mission is unlikely at present, given political hostility from the warring parties in Sudan, the fatigue of the AU, and the potential cost of such a mission. In addition, three factors stand out as particularly impeding for international intervention: exit strategies, leadership and geopolitical interests.

Potential exit

Any future international military mission in Sudan would also need a well-defined exit strategy and a clear end-state to avoid open-ended deployments. Potential donors and contributing countries would demand predictable timelines, and missions risk losing their legitimacy if they appear to be ineffective or permanent. Leaving a conflict area too soon can pose real danger to the people who were protected, and leaving too late can create a discrepancy between the peacekeepers and the people they are mandated to protect.¹⁸

No will to lead

It would require leadership to deploy a new mission to Sudan, and at present, no state, organisation, or actor is willing to do so. Firstly, it would be difficult to secure a

mandate in a divided UN Security Council, where Russia has vetoed a resolution drafted by Sierra Leone and the United Kingdom, for the protection of civilians and access to humanitarian aid. The Russian delegation argued that the draft did not take into account Sudan’s own right to protect its civilians and borders, and furthermore that the UK was denying the Sudanese government this right.¹⁹ As confusing as the Russian statement may seem, it is part of a Russian narrative to blame Western countries for neo-colonialism.²⁰ Secondly, the AU is overstretched with a budget heavily depended on external donors, and withdrew from Sudan only a few years ago.²¹ Even if a mandate were agreed upon, the funding would be of major concern, given the earlier experiences with UNAMID, but also with examples like the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somali (AUSSOM), where the AU currently pleads for funding to close the mission’s financial gap. The lack of will to lead among state actors or organisations, may also be due to the fact that the major powers have other security-policy priorities, such as Ukraine and Gaza.²²

Geopolitics—Foreign interests in Sudan

The UAE has a significant role in the conflict not only as a supporter and supplier of the RSF, but also as a member of the ad hoc coalition called “the Quad”, consisting of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the US. According to their joint statements, the group is committed to ending the war, to restore peace and security, and to appoint a civilian-ruled government. Their ambition is to secure a three-month ceasefire, followed by a nine-month transition to civilian rule.²³ However, agreement on joint statements and next steps has proved difficult.²⁴

The SAF is supported by Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, and Turkey, while the RSF is supported by the UAE. Calling the war in Sudan a “proxy war” is not straightforward,

17 Mills, K. (2015). *International responses to mass atrocities in Africa: Responsibility to protect, prosecute, and palliate*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

18 Avant, D. D., García, M., and Sheffield, J. (2023). Ethical exit: When should peacekeepers depart? *European Journal of International Security*, 8(3), 267–285. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2023.9>

19 United Nations. (2024, November 18). *Russian Federation vetoes Security Council resolution aimed at strengthening measures to protect civilians, increase humanitarian aid access in Sudan* (SC/15901). <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15901.doc.htm>

20 Audinet, M. (2025, July 31). ‘Down with neocolonialism!’ Strategic narrative resurgence and foreign policy preferences in wartime Russia. *European Journal of International Security*. Advance online publication. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-journal-of-international-security/article/down-with-neocolonialism-strategic-narrative-resurgence-and-foreign-policy-preferences-in-wartime-russia/9CEAAFF6DE91DDDA6DC8276E6497D3D7> cambridge.org+1

21 African Union. (2022, June 13). *Financing the Union: Towards the financial autonomy of the African Union – The Kigali Decision on Financing the Union*. African Union. https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/35739-file-financing_the_union_6.pdf

22 Council on Foreign Relations. (2025). *Conflicts to watch in 2025*. <https://www.cfr.org/report/conflicts-watch-2025>.

23 U.S. Department of State. (2025, September). *Joint statement on restoring peace and security in Sudan*. <https://www.state.gov/releases/2025/09/joint-statement-on-restoring-peace-and-security-in-sudan/>.

24 Al-Husseini, A. (14 November 2025). *The Quad’s struggle*. *Al Ahram Weekly*. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1203/556699/AlAhram-Weekly/World/The-Quad%E2%80%99s-struggle.aspx>.

because the warring parties receive support from actors that otherwise have either strong ties or somewhat strained relations with one another.

The UAE has several reasons for supporting the RSF. The UAE is making efforts to undermine political Islam, and since the Arab Spring, the UAE has invested in actors supportive of the UAE's model of "moderate Islam", such as Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi's 2013 military coup in Egypt, which dethroned the elected president, Mohammed Morsi of the Islamist group Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE views SAF as an extension of the former regime of Bashir, because of its close ties to Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the UAE's regional rivals Turkey, Qatar, and Iran.²⁵ The geopolitical dynamics around Sudan are complicated, as SAF's allies Saudi Arabia and Egypt are having good relations with the UAE, outside the conflict. In regard to this, the UAE distinguishes itself from the others, taking bold steps to cement its position in the region, and it also does not seem to shy away from questionable deals, such as its gold trade with the RSF, which provides funding for the group.²⁶

Sudan has become Africa's third-largest gold producer, after South Africa and Ghana, with an estimated USD 4–6 billion in exports, which in itself makes up around 70 per cent of Sudan's total export revenue. The gold is extracted through small-scale "artisanal" mining in rural areas. An estimated two million people are involved in this form of mining. Both warring parties use their cross-border connections and networks to export the gold, with most of it ending up in the UAE, which has strong ties to the RSF.²⁷ The UAE imported gold worth USD 105 billion in 2024, making it the world's second-largest importer of gold and an important international hub for the gold trade. The UAE is also the main importer of artisanally mined gold

from Africa, including Sudan. The gold is smuggled from Sudan mainly through Chad and Egypt.²⁸

Hemedti, leader of the RSF, established relations with the UAE well before the ongoing war, pursuing gold trade and sending RSF troops to Yemen. Hemedti built his gold empire during the Darfur conflict by taking control of gold mines in Darfur, with the approval of Bashir.²⁹ Furthermore, the combatants who were deployed to Yemen were fighting for Saudi- and UAE-backed pro-government forces.³⁰ As the UAE sided with the RSF during the conflict, although the UAE denies this, arms and drones have poured into the Darfur region in western Sudan, through different routes such as Somalia, Chad, and Libya. This has drawn attention from the media, and protests have taken place around the world, pointing to the UAE's involvement in the conflict, particularly after the siege of al-Fasher and the atrocities committed there by the RSF.³¹ The language of RSF's social media and propaganda is delivered in both English and Arabic, repeatedly accusing the SAF of being Islamist, calling them "Islamic Movement Army" and part of the "terrorist Muslim Brotherhood."³²

SAF has support from Egypt due to its already established ties, despite SAF's connections to Islamist groups. Regional stability is a priority for Egypt, as it shares borders with Sudan and a coastline along the Red Sea. The same goes for Saudi Arabia, with its vast coastline on the Red Sea, despite Riyadh and Abu Dhabi being allies. Without some sort of intervention, the stability of the region is at risk, which is a major concern for countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Neighbouring countries would face an increase of refugee flows, illegal trade, and cross-border armed groups. One major power is, of course, the US, which has strong ties to the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. In November 2025, the Trump administration and Saudi

25 Kourgiotis, P. (2020). 'Moderate Islam' made in the United Arab Emirates: Public diplomacy and the politics of containment. *Religions*, 11(1), 43. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11010043>.

26 Saed, O., and Pearce, F. (March 2026). Sudan's war and the gold that fuels it. *Yale Environment* 360, Yale School of the Environment. <https://e360.yale.edu/features/sudan-war-gold-mining>

27 Saed and Pearce, Sudan's war.

28 Ummel, M., and Schulz, Y. (2024, May). On the trail of African gold: Quantifying production and trade to combat illicit flows. *SWISSAID*. <https://swissaid.kinsta.cloud/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/swissaid-on-the-trail-of-african-gold-web-ok.pdf>.

29 Abdelaziz, K., Georgy, M., and El Dahan, M. (2019). Exclusive: Sudan militia leader grew rich by selling gold. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/exclusivesudan-militia-leader-grew-rich-by-selling-gold-idUSKBN1Y01DQ/>.

30 Middle East Eye. (November 2019). Huge Sudanese losses in Yemen highlight fighters' role in the conflict. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/thousands-saudi-paid-sudanese-mercenaries-die-frontline-yemen>.

31 VRT News. (12 November 2025). Protest against UAE's alleged complicity in the violence in Sudan. <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2025/11/12/protest-against-ucaas-alleged-complicity-in-the-violence-in-sudan/>; Cornwell, A., and Lubell, M. (10 October 2025). Details of the Gaza ceasefire agreement. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/details-gaza-ceasefire-agreement-2025-10-10/>.

32 Rapid Support Forces. (N.d.). RSF official Telegram channel. *Telegram*. <https://t.me/s/RSFSudan>.

Arabia strengthened their strategic partnership through deepened economic and defense cooperation, as well as promises of greater regional involvement by the US, which is a major priority for Saudi Arabia.³³

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is highly unlikely that any conventional peacekeeping mission will be adopted any time soon. Despite the fact that the AU has the right to intervene militarily in a member state under grave circumstances, such as war crimes and genocide, it would be hesitant to take on the leadership role again, with recent experiences of UNAMID. The UN has a lot to lose by going into Sudan, with the high stakes that are involved, as the UN is not only fighting a financial crisis and division within the Security Council, but also over its own relevance.³⁴ The trend of UN peacekeeping missions is unpromising, as the budget has been reduced from USD 8.47 billion in 2014, to USD 5.59 billion in 2024. Another peacekeeping mission in Sudan is something these organisations cannot really afford at the moment.

The domestic challenges have proven to be too difficult to manage, in terms of the vast areas to cover, competition for resources among different communities, and internally

displaced people. Meeting those challenges would require a large and long-term operation, with contingency planning and strong ties to the local communities, enabling them to eventually transform their society from within. The geopolitical problem is that international actors are feeding the war with military equipment, in exchange for resources such as gold. There are also geopolitical interests that collide from an ideological point of view, with the UAE rooting for the RSF, because it believes that the SAF is leaning towards a more Islamist policy. By contrast, Egypt is more concerned about regional stability and would rather keep things like they were before, and despite the fear of the Muslim Brotherhood, it sides with the SAF because of already established relations between the two.

Lately, there has been more attention paid to Sudan for several reasons. One such reason is the deepening of relations between the Trump administration and Saudi Arabia.³⁵ As Sudan is a matter of Saudi Arabia's concern and Trump has promised to take action, saying "we're going to start working on it," With that statement in mind, potential future responses to the situation in Sudan may still materialize, the question is in what form, under what leadership and under what conditions. ■

Oscar Fröberg is an analyst at the Swedish Defence Research Agency. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Arabic with a specialization in Middle Eastern and North African Studies from Stockholm University, as well as a Master's degree in International Studies and Diplomacy from SOAS, University of London.

33 The White House. (18 November 2025). *Fact sheet: President Donald J. Trump solidifies economic and defense partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov>.

34 UN News. (19 May 2025). *UN faces deepening financial crisis, urges members to pay up*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/05/1163436>; Hansen, A. S., Hansen, W., von Gienanth, T., Benkler, M., Pietz, T., and Waehlich, M. (January 2025). *Five trends in UN peace operations and five calls to action* (Study). Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF). <https://www.zif-berlin.org>.

35 (The White House, 2025)