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## **A Dire Crisis in Sudan: A Global Call to Action**

The war in Sudan is the largest war in the world today and, as such, has precipitated a humanitarian crisis of biblical proportions. The war is, in its essence, a counter-revolutionary war, waged by the Sudanese security state against the people of Sudan who dared to organise a revolution against them in 2018. That revolution, Sudan's third in 70 years, saw the ousting of Bashir's Islamo-military dictatorship, a dictatorship underpinned by a devil's bargain between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Muslim Brotherhood of Sudan that ruled Sudan for 29 years.

This is also a war of succession; the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), both of which were integral to Bashir's security apparatus first unseated him in 2019, then with intense international pressure relented to power-share with a civilian cabinet (2019-2021) and later, when their economic and political interests were threatened, staged a coup that led Sudan to this war (October 25, 2021). Unable to consolidate their differences<sup>1</sup>, tensions between SAF and the RSF, their domestic constituents and their foreign backers, eventually came to a head on April 15, 2023.

As the heirs of Bashir, SAF and RSF are using every tool in the Bashir playbook including ethnic mobilisation, genocide, the use of chemical weapons and the policy of starvation as a weapon of war, in this war to capture the levers of Bashir's lucrative security state and position themselves to decide the political and economic future of Sudan.

Formerly brothers in arms, waging genocide against the people of Darfur in the first few years of the millennium, this Cane and Abel, SAF's General Burhan and the RSF's General Hemedti, have through decades of impunity, led Sudan through not just a genocide, but also a string of coups and now a devastating war. Sudan's civilians are sacrificed at the altar of their unquenchable thirst for power and wealth.

When I was in Khartoum at the start of the war, there was a sense amongst many that had witnessed the lead up to the war – the RSF tanks rolling into Khartoum, the bellicose language of Bashir's axe-grinding Islamist loyalists and the SAF's belligerent language around the return to civilian rule – that this war would be a battle between security and former regime forces and would otherwise not be the Sudanese public's business. So, the remains of Bashir's security state made it their business: mass mobilisation, hate speech, devastation to critical civilian infrastructure, the abrupt closure of escape routes, indiscriminate bombings, have all drawn the Sudanese public into the fray. Out of desperation many are now making impossible choices of favouring one belligerent party over another to stay alive. All the while, the four horsemen of the apocalypse: War, Death, Disease, and Conquest are visiting upon Sudan's people.

### *Humanitarian*

The humanitarian crisis in Sudan can now only be described in superlatives: the world's worst humanitarian crisis, the world's worst hunger crisis by scale and sometimes by magnitude, the world's worst displacement crisis (over 11 million internally displaced alone) and the world's

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<sup>1</sup> <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/a-coup-cannot-serve-two-masters/>

worst protection crisis. Famine has also belatedly been confirmed (August 2024), and is spreading. Conflict related sexual violence is being perpetrated on the bodies of women, children and in some cases men, chiefly by the RSF.<sup>2</sup> 19 million children are out of school and over 80% of health centres, already struggling since the 2021 coup, are no longer functioning. These are dramatic figures and have continued to grow no matter the changes in battlefield lines. Behind every one of these statistic is a desperate story of survival and the indefatigability of the human spirit under the harshest conditions. With the RSF's attacks on power and water stations as well as other critical infrastructure, people in the central parts of Sudan will now face temperatures of 122F (50 Centigrade). Civilians in what remains of IDP camps in Darfur will continue to face extremely desperate conditions.<sup>3</sup>

This suffering is not incidental. The warring parties, committed to extinguishing any trace of the revolutionary zeal that seeks to end military rule and usher in accountability, have been using starvation as a weapon of war. The Sudanese Armed Forces, which the UN recognises as the *de facto* government, has been able to use this recognition to block aid into Darfur, a territory it largely does not control. The SAF also denies the famine that is primarily ripping its way through Darfur and the Kordofan region or the acute food insecurity that has entrenched itself in eastern Sudan, an area they do control. By holding up permissions for aid access, visas for international humanitarian staff, and working with the UNSC to block resolutions around aid, the SAF has made the entire international humanitarian system complicit in its policy to starve the people of Sudan. The UN and others are hoping that by giving SAF legitimacy they will be able to stop the starvation, but they have it backwards: SAF is starving people in order to position the international community to give them legitimacy through seeking permissions and aid access. In any case, the deference the UN, in particular, has paid to the authorities in Port Sudan has not paid off and the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate.

For its part, the RSF has spent the last two years systematically looting aid warehouses across the country, intimidating drivers of aid trucks, blocking aid trucks from delivering food to children in El Fasher and other areas and instituting bureaucratic access constraints through its aid authority, the Sudan Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations (SARHO) modelled after the SAF-controlled Humanitarian Aid Commission. Once it sets up its parallel authorities, the RSF would be able to actualise a more fully-fledged starvation policy too.

Almost everyone with a stated or implied responsibility to respond to the world's largest humanitarian crisis in decades has failed to adequately respond, if at all. This includes the multilateral organisations, donor states and the *de facto* authorities in any one area in Sudan. The only thing standing between the people in Sudan and utter immiseration are the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) and other mutual aid groups who have been providing community kitchens, free clinics, child-friendly spaces, post rape-care and evacuation support since the first few days of the war. The work of these groups, having been formally recognised by the Nobel Committee through a nomination, winning a prize from the EU and working with US government funding to deliver aid where it's needed, at a fraction of the cost of INGOs, is in grave danger with the cuts in aid instituted this year.

The US has been the largest humanitarian donor for Sudan and the generosity of the American people has quite literally kept people – and hope – alive in Sudan. With little clarity around what US foreign assistance will look like after September with the drawdown of USAID, there will be

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/04/sudan-rapid-support-forces-horrific-and-widespread-use-of-sexual-violence-leaves-lives-in-tatters/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.msf.org/desperate-situation-people-fleeing-zamzam-camp-sudan>

a crisis and potential cliff edge in funding. The lifesaving work of these responders could immediately cease, as it did in February, if no new or alternative funding is secured.

The abrupt shuttering of USAID does not only affect humanitarian funding to ERRs and other responders; it impacts vital instruments such as the famine tracking instrument FEWSNET which had been better able to detect the onset of famine than the UN instrument, which initially relied on authorities closely affiliated with the SAF to make the determination. The UN's Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) was much later than local groups and INGOs recognising famine and only after a referral to the Famine Review Committee, to bypass state authorities. The SAF still denies that famine has taken root, creating many obstacles to famine response. Another pillar of USAID programming whose loss will have an impact is the support to democratic transformation, for beneficiary groups across the country for whom the funding was a huge lifeline for those countering autocracy, polarisation and hate speech.

Currently the UN's humanitarian envelope for Sudan for this year of \$4.2bn is only 13% funded and since the war started, the response has been perpetually underfunded, all while the humanitarian needs have grown. This is a travesty for the world's largest humanitarian disaster in decades, taking place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### *Atrocities and the Protection of Civilians (PoC)*

A core feature of this war has been the manifold atrocity violence. This war is primarily a war against civilians and it is they who have paid the highest, and often the ultimate, price. The RSF, as an ethnic franchise more than it is a military entity, has used this war to settle scores with local groups. In West Darfur, particularly, the RSF-allied Arab pastoralist groups saw an opportunity to dispossess the Masalit ethnic group from their land not one but twice in 2023. Earlier this year the US government finally recognised these deliberate atrocities as genocide. The RSF have been running campaigns of systematic atrocity violence, rape and sexual slavery against many communities in central Sudan too<sup>4</sup> and have perpetuated several atrocities on Zamzam and Abu Shouk IDP camps in North Darfur<sup>5</sup>. Testimonies from the ground often tell of the systematic targeting of men and boys for execution based on ethnic identity. In other words, the RSF, created to rape, pillage and destroy, are, under the cover of this war, doing just that.

Meanwhile, the SAF has been enacting a systematic campaign of indiscriminate bombing, often in market towns, during market days, where many civilians gather and in other populated areas. The US government has also declared that the SAF has used chemical weapons in this war. They have used them before, including in Darfur in 2016<sup>6</sup>. There are also reports of the SAF using incendiary weapons in the form of barrel bombs against civilian targets, including markets<sup>7</sup>.

Weapons proliferation has been a central feature of this war. What started as a reasonably low-tech conflict, has in only two years transformed into a war of the future: the latest drones, jamming technology and missiles have been used. The numbers of countries engaged in supplying one side of the other is growing and spans the globe.<sup>8,9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8rl0xv8gko>

<sup>5</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/sudan-darfur-military-rsf-war-zamzam-b6c60fe0883327aa0d64cd39d3a8e260>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/scorched-earth-poisoned-air-sudanese-government-forces-ravage-jebel-marra-darfur/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/more-than-120-mostly-civilians-killed-two-days-sudan-bombardments-2024-12-10/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2024/07/new-weapons-fuelling-the-sudan-conflict/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/09/sudan-abusive-warring-parties-acquire-new-weapons>

Regardless of the changes in the frontlines, the RSF and SAF, and their allied militias have been breaking the US-backed UN Darfur arms embargo, particularly the RSF by flying in weapons. Despite efforts by civil society within and outside of Sudan and outside it, to call for the protection of civilians through measures such as safe zones, agricultural zones, functioning infrastructure especially telecoms networks and early warning systems for communities, these measures have found little support from bilateral or multilateral actors and at the UNSC Russia, at the request of the SAF, vetoed the last PoC resolution put forth by penholder UK and Sierra Leone.

All the while, there are no accountability mechanisms for civilians to reach justice. Neither SAF nor the RSF have previously been subjected to meaningful accountability mechanisms. The SAF is shielding ICC indictee and former president Omar al-Bashir as well as other ICC indictees such as Ahmed Haroun, the current head of Bashir's former party, the National Congress Party (NCP).

For many people in Sudan the war did not start on April 15<sup>th</sup> but merely arrived in Khartoum on that day. Whole generations of people have been born and many have died in IDP camps in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile. In a sustained political culture of impunity that also rewards the "gun class" Sudan is now seeing a proliferating of militias, with several Hemedtis in the making. This is because the SAF, as the national army, and the islamists that have animated it since 1977 fear internal power grabs and coups and so have trimmed down the officer and infantry class while bloating the top brass. This has meant that SAF has been increasingly reliant on militias to fight its war, the RSF being now the most famous, but seemingly by no means the last. During their time in power the Islamists effectively turned the army into a militia and a militia – the RSF – into an army. They continue to play that role today. The jihadist Baraa bin Malik Brigade and Popular Defence Forces (PDF) – as well as the ethnic-based Sudan Shield forces - are just a few examples of this mushrooming trend. These militias operate with the same impunity and have grown in size and wealth during this war. Atrocities committed by these groups, in particular summary executions by the Baraa bin Malik Brigade, now grown into a Corps, show gruesome and often ritualistic killings featuring beheadings and disembowelment.

Focusing on a military binary between SAF and the RSF often obfuscates the political role of the many-headed Islamist movement who want to make a comeback by any means necessary, and who are using the SAF, once again, as a primary vehicle.

#### *External intervention*

What started as a war steeped in personal animus between Burhan and his then deputy Hemedti, has now metastasised to a war with a broad geographic reach – no part of Sudan is safe. This has put the entire Horn of Africa, Sahel and Red Sea regions in danger of massive destabilisation and created a war that is taking place across three orders of magnitude: the local, the national and the regional/international.

Regional actors have exploited the war in order to meet their increasingly divergent policy objectives particularly in a context of US withdrawal from the region and likely driven by anxieties around a dedollarised international financial system. None have been so active as the Arab Gulf states, in particular the UAE, which despite its protestations to the contrary has been credibly reported to have supported the RSF in their genocidal campaigns across Darfur and for their violent actions across the rest of Sudan. The UAE has also been using the cover of the Emirati Red Crescent and the setting up of "field hospitals" in Chad and South Sudan as a

means of delivering ever more and ever more sophisticated weaponry to the RSF<sup>10</sup>. There is credible reporting including from the UN Panel of Experts report in Jan 2024 that the UAE broke the UN Arms embargo on Darfur. This is whilst they were on the UN Security Council.

Ground reporting from Darfur, especially Nyala (South Darfur) shows flights likely carrying materiel to the RSF, often going through Uganda, Kenya and Chad. Recent research and flight tracker information show that northern Somalia (Puntland) and Somaliland have also become transit points, with both frequent and volume. The UAE's patronage of the RSF has drawn in Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to support the SAF with deepening rifts between these middle powers manifesting in their support to conflict parties in the Horn/eastern coast of the Red Sea, with huge destabilising potential. Early reports from the recent RSF attacks on Port Sudan indicate that the UAE and Turkey may have been involved in reprisal drone attacks on each other within Sudan. This represents a marked escalation in the external intervention of these US allies in Sudan.

This war has made Sudan easier to pillage as the warring parties sell gold, real estate, and port deals for weapons to keep the war going. Their presumptive buyers have become less and less palatable to the West over the past two years: Russia, Iran and even reportedly North Korea have reportedly been in discussions with the SAF for interests on the Red Sea. The gold trade in particular, has increased in volume and profit since the war started – almost all of it bound for the UAE - as has the smuggling of gum Arabic, cattle and other agricultural goods, some of which go to Egypt. These countries have little financial incentive to see an end to the war. All of the profits from these go not towards ameliorating conditions for civilians but to buy fighter jets, drones, and artillery to continue this war.

The UAE, as the principal backer of the RSF, says its foreign policy is to oppose Islamism in the region but that has not been the case in Sudan. The UAE was a close ally to Bashir's Islamo-military government and the military wing of the hybrid government post revolution (2019-21). Key Islamists, such as the Sudanese Islamist Movement (SIM) head Ali Karti, are believed to be major stakeholders in oil interests at the Abu Dhabi National Oil Corporation (ADNOC). The Saudis and Egyptian meanwhile, though they say they are opposed to political Islam taking further root in their region have developed a tolerance for a variety of Sudan's Islamists and have thrown their weight behind the SAF and some of its islamists supporters. This is particularly true for those based in Egypt and Sudan's neighbouring countries.

As middle powers vacillate between pragmatic and ideological foreign policies, the expressions of these shifting positions find themselves in increasingly adversarial stances in Sudan. Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar back the SAF, while the UAE backs the RSF. All back military rule in Sudan. The recent escalation in the Nyala-Port Sudan exchange of drone fire, which reportedly saw Emirati and Turkish military operators firing on each other shows the potential for ever more dangerous escalation.

Ending this war requires political agreements in place across all three levels of conflict: local, national and regional/international. This must take place within a framework of civilian government that could finally discourage competition for political power through the gun.

#### *Progression of Conflict*

It is clear that this war represents something of an end of an arc of history. Bashir's regime is consuming itself and trying to survive this war of succession. What comes next depends entirely

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/21/world/africa/uae-sudan-civil-war.html>

on how this war is resolved: with a view towards justice, reform and civilian rule, or more impunity and power-sharing. Sudan's history shows that there is no military victory likely and that given the right conditions all wars, even at this scale, would end in a political agreement. But in the meantime, with the world choosing to entertain conflict management rather than conflict resolution – for example through the US/Saudi Jeddah talks or the Egypt-led Cairo talks – we have an entrenching of the violence. War is becoming not just the means to political ends but an end in itself; an organising principle for the two main camps and the constituencies they covet. There is increasingly a chasm between the two. Despite this, civilians overwhelmingly want the war to end but they want an end that guarantees some form of justice, a key element of peace processes that has always been deferred and, ultimately, denied.

The surest way of effectively tackling the manifold humanitarian crises is to end the war but there currently appears to be no partner for peace in Sudan. The SAF has refused to attend any talks after the initial rounds and this position rarely shifts whether they are winning or losing on the battlefield. The continuance of war justifies, in their mind, continued military rule and therefore there is no incentive for them to end the war. The RSF too, wish to continue the war in order to fight long enough, despite being reviled by many Sudanese, to eke out an opportunity to shape Sudan's future for itself and its Gulf patrons. As for the multiheaded Hydra that is the Islamist movement, they have used the war as a means of manufacturing consent for their return, using the atrocities committed by the RSF, an entity they created and emboldened, to foment an alternative common enemy. This they intend, will exonerate them – and decades of their violent misrule – in the process.

The longer the war continues, the more the war economy will represent the only livelihood options and draw more civilians into its web. Today in Sudan, armed groups are the most prolific employers, smuggling, particularly of gold and gum Arabic in RSF areas, the most profitable industry and guns are cheaper than groceries. Industrial capability has reached minimal levels and costs have risen markedly with inflation at 118%.<sup>11</sup> Farming, once one of the biggest industries in the country and critical for lowering the curve on famine deaths, is now in ruins, with many farmers displaced from their land, with little investment and an absence of agricultural inputs, or exorbitant prices of seeds and fuel that have made farming economically unviable for many. In RSF areas particularly, mass violence against farmers and burning of harvests and stocks have further discouraged farming.

History tells us that the armed groups in Sudan, and in Africa in general, rarely disappear, especially once they begin to invest economically and act autonomously of the state structures as the RSF has done for years under the watch of both the SAF and its Islamist backers. In the final analysis, the SAF and RSF today represent a distinction without much difference: two arms of the security state that want to concentrate power in the military's hands and eliminate their enemies, civilian or armed. Both now seem intent to drive Sudan towards a forever war that could well fragment Sudan into unstable fiefdoms of violent warlords.

#### *International responses to the war*

The task of the day is therefore to very quickly arrest Sudan's descent into a failed and fragmented state. International efforts so far have been misguided or ill-thought out. At the outset of the war, the US jettisoned all commitments to a multilateral approach towards Sudan and bilaterally set up the Jeddah talks with Saudi Arabia. This created an opening for other international stakeholders to set up their own talks and led to "forum shopping" by the belligerent parties. Though the May 2023 Jeddah Declaration was signed by the SAF and the

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<sup>11</sup> <https://african.business/2025/04/long-reads/sudans-economy-shattered-by-two-years-of-war>

RSF, it's clear that while there is no political agreement about how this war ends, a ceasefire will be difficult to achieve. A focus on the political talks is therefore important to the success of any broad peace process. Since the initial Jeddah talks concluded in November 2023, the SAF has refused to attend any more talks and the RSF, though it attends, has done so mostly to provide cover for their atrocities as in the case of Al-Geneina and Ardamata in West Darfur in 2023<sup>12</sup>. Current mediation set-ups reward the belligerents by giving them the ability to dictate whether talks are successful or not, thereby perpetually guaranteeing their failure in line with their political objectives.

The multilateral space has not had any great alacrity when it comes to Sudan's war. The UNSG's Personal Envoy Ramtane Lamamra is based in Algiers, rarely consults with civilian Sudanese stakeholders, makes visits only to Port Sudan and then only a few times a year. Despite being asked by multiple entities to take a lead role in coordinating the political talks (with the AU and others in particular) humanitarian response in Sudan, he has not done so, despite having the largest team of any envoy (16 staff). The AU and IGAD as the regional bloc, have either competed over the Sudan file or, after they later agreed to deconflict, have done very little to advance peace talks.

The US' appointment of an envoy was welcome but ultimately disempowered by the Biden administration, in deference to US allies, chief of which is the UAE. With all the international conflicting interests embroiled in Sudan's very globalised war, the appointment of a high-level White House envoy who can speak to Arab leaders with the president's authority is needed.

After the inauguration, there were initial signs that Secretary Rubio would prioritise responding to Sudan's catastrophe but this has not materialised. Moreover, in President Trump's recent trips to the Gulf, Sudan did not seem to be mentioned even amongst countries that are either directly participating in conflict or directly contributing to keeping the war going and whose competitions are playing out to devastating effect not just in Sudan, but across the entire Horn of Africa.

#### *Recommendations*

Humanitarian: funding is critical for Sudan's humanitarian response. But funding to mutual aid groups such as the ERRS and farming cooperatives is not only a better guarantee of delivery but also a more sound investment of humanitarian funding. Young people, who constitute the majority of Sudan's population, are vulnerable to joining armed or extremist groups, engaging in mutual aid programmes directly keeps these young people away from nefarious and far more lucrative enterprises.

Programming for youth groups in Sudan's periphery and war affected regions is also key, lest the war be the only industry there. Support to non-partisan media is also critical, especially to efforts to counter hate speech.

POC: discussions around viable PoC options must once again be prioritised. There are many options put forward that require political support first, then financial. Often these will require negotiation rather than money, for example reinstituting telecoms networks in parts of the country that have gone dark since February 2024.

Peace and stability: It is clear that without reform to the military structure of the Sudanese state and economy that Sudan will continue in cycles of endless war, brought about by conditions that only allow for political competition through the barrel of the gun not the ballot box. Therefore,

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2023/11/sudan-killings-ardamata>

support for civilian rule, no matter how difficult a prospect it is right now, is not isosteric or blue-sky thinking; it is the most practical way to usher in an end to war in Sudan. The transitional period after Bashir's fall (2019-2021) left the militarised system of rule and economy intact and expected a civilian cabinet to administer it. SAF is an army that has only ever fought its own people. It is in need of urgent and extensive reforms. Simultaneously, Sudan cannot have more than one army. Therefore, and in line with calls from revolutionary groups, it is imperative to disarm the RSF, chiefly, as well as other militias. Merely subsuming them into a super military structure will not bring peace. Equitable economic opportunities in industry must accompany demobilisation efforts, if the peace is to hold.

The arc of a successful peace agreement must have the instituting of a civic and just peace at its heart, rather than repeat the failed peace agreement formulas of old. For this to be successful, research shows that women must be central to formulating the peace agreement.

Talks: so long as the ceasefire talks remain the central and most consequential forum, violence and its perpetrators will continue to be rewarded and prospects for a long-term peace will be hampered, not least by the ability of the warring parties to scupper the talks. Instead, international mediators should prioritise *political* talks amongst civilians and focus on how to broach civilian, not military agendas, that must include a wide variety of civilian stakeholder, especially women and young people and not rely on civilian elites, as before. The inclusion of Islamist groups must be done carefully with many guardrails and guarantees in place as they have the money, the propaganda machines and a 30-year head start on other civilian groups, in particular, the revolutionary movements. It is only once a civilian consensus around a minimum common agenda is reached by civic groups, with women leading the way, that the ceasefire track amongst armed actors should be joined with the political one. The warring parties must be given as few opportunities to derail talks and the right incentive structures for each of them - beyond just SAF and the RSF - must be structured. Humanitarian negotiations must be delinked from ceasefire and political talks entirely.

External intervention: Overwhelmingly Sudan's Arab neighbours have resisted, and continue to resist, democratisation in Sudan, encouraging the violent repression of the revolution in 2019. The people of Sudan remained resolute in their commitment to freedom. They helped collapse the economy during the transitional period and still people overwhelmingly stayed committed to democratic transformation. So, they and their clients eventually resorted to war, to push commitment to democracy civilian rule to one side, while people concentrate on survival. But what the mutual aid groups show us is that people can and do stay committed to the values of democratic transformation - service, community, and seeking genuine peace - even in the most desperate of times. Sudan's Arab neighbours and other middle powers including Turkey continue to side against a civilian Sudan in a counter-revolutionary war that can have few domestic winners, if any.

Sudan is surrounded by chaos entrepreneurs, chief of which is the UAE, whose predatory and imperialist overtures in the Horn of Africa has driven wars and secessionist movements across the region from Yemen, to Libya, to Sudan to Somalia. But it doesn't have to be this way, there must be opportunities to get the region, and the UAE in particular, to do things differently, trade more equitably. The US which has for years relied on the UAE and others to outspend China in Africa, must come up with ways to engage with and deconflict its allies' increasingly confrontational stance in the Sahel/ Horn/ Red Sea arenas.

The people of Sudan have endured enough. The US has a role to play, not least amongst its allies in the region who are increasingly driving the dynamics of this conflict.