

Sudan's huge tragedy and the way out

Wednesday 27 September 2023, by [ACHCAR Gilbert](#) (Date first published: 27 September 2023).

The Sudanese tragedy continues to worsen, and the world is almost ignoring it, preoccupied quasi exclusively with the ongoing war in Ukraine, just as it previously ignored the horrific wars that have taken place over decades in and around Sudan, as well as other, still more deadly wars in sub-Saharan Africa. It is as if there was a racial ranking for the attraction of international attention, according to which interest in conflicts diminishes as the skin of the protagonists becomes darker. At the forefront come conflicts between blond whites, such as the Russians, Ukrainians, and other Europeans, followed by the East Asians, and after them with gradually darker skin: the Caucasians, the Levantines (the war in Syria has certainly received much greater attention than today's war in Sudan, even if it is legitimate for the Syrians to complain about the lack of interest in their country's fate - all things are relative indeed), the Yemenis, the peoples of Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Horn of Africa, all the way to Black Africa.

The Sudanese tragedy continues to worsen, and it has already reached a huge magnitude, with UN agencies reporting that the number of dead has exceeded five thousand, and the number of wounded twelve thousand. This is a very conservative estimate, the same sources believing that actual numbers are much higher. A few days ago, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, issued a report reminding the world that at the end of 2022, that is, before the outbreak of the conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Sudan had more than 3.7 million internally displaced people, most of whom living in camps in Darfur. Another 800,000 Sudanese were living as refugees in neighboring countries, such as Chad, South Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia. At the same time, the country was home to more than a million refugees from other countries. Most of them came from South Sudan, but there were also joined since late 2020 by refugees fleeing the crisis in northern Ethiopia, and others coming from Eritrea, Syria, and the Central African Republic.

In the first five months of the current conflict, more than a million refugees and returnees fled the country, while another 4.3 million people were displaced within Sudan, making it home to the largest number of internally displaced people in the world. Add to this the impact of climate change-related weather conditions, including floods and droughts, and their consequence in crop failure and livestock decimation, as UNHCR has indicated, and you begin to realize the great severity of the humanitarian crisis facing Sudan today - to say nothing of the other tragedies of war, especially the horrific fate of women, always the first victims of wars fought by men.

Against this dreadful background, the UN Secretary-General's representative in Sudan, Volker Perthes, submitted his resignation nearly two weeks ago, warning of the country's slide into civil war. The truth is that this slide began early on, and escalated during the summer when tribal leaders in Darfur announced their support for the RSF, calling on their fellow tribesmen in the military to side with the forces led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. Sudan has become geographically divided between an eastern region controlled by the SAF and a western region controlled by the RSF, while the areas between them, including the capital Khartoum, are disputed by the two parties.

The truth is that Perthes, and behind him the United States and the European countries, bears great responsibility for this outcome in Sudan because of his insistence on appeasing the military. Instead of supporting the battle waged by the Sudanese democratic forces, led by the “resistance committees”, to reject the coup carried out by the armed forces under the leadership of Abdel Fattah al-Burhan in the fall of 2021, Perthes continued to press for a new bargain with the military and dealt with Al-Burhan as if he were still the legitimate head of state. This is what allowed Al-Burhan to address the UN General Assembly last week, drawing rightful protests from the Sudanese democratic forces.

So, where is Sudan headed? It has entered a war that bears all the ingredients of long-term conflicts: not only the existence of internal divisions along regional, ethnic, and tribal lines that are pushing towards the transformation of the conflict between two military factions into a civil war between components of Sudan’s population, but also the existence of external players supplying the two conflicting parties with the fuel of war in the form of money and weapons. It is no secret that Sudan is turning into a new arena of regional and international conflicts, like neighboring Libya. Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar himself is one of those intervening in the Sudanese conflict, alongside the RSF, which is also supported by the Russian “Wagner” forces and the United Arab Emirates, its old sponsor, while the SAF receive support from Egypt, Qatar, Turkey, and even Ukraine!

The way out of this tragedy is difficult to imagine today considering how much the situation has deteriorated since the fighting broke out. Those calling for a cessation of fighting and reconciliation between the two warring factions are dreaming, as it is no longer possible at all for the two factions to coexist within the same state (if a ceasefire were to occur between them along with some political settlement, it would be nothing more than a temporary truce).

On the other hand, it is not within the SAF’s reach to defeat the RSF and stabilize the situation under their exclusive control, except after a very long, extremely deadly and destructive conflict, to which the famous saying of the Roman historian Tacitus would ultimately apply: “They make a desert and call it peace.”

What remains, therefore? What about the “federal” solution that Dagalo called for, i.e. a new division of Sudan’s territory, leading to the emergence of a new state in the west and south of the country dominated by the criminal Janjaweed militia, which Omar al-Bashir elevated to the status of part of the official armed forces under the RSF label? Such a “solution”, if it could stop the fighting currently taking place across the country, would imply an escalation of genocide and ethnic cleansing in the areas controlled by the RSF, in Darfur in particular.

The truth is that there is no longer any way to stop Sudan from sinking deeper into civil war other than the intervention of international forces under UN command to impose a cessation of fighting and supervise the democratic transition that both Al-Burhan and Dagalo claim that they are ready to submit to, each one of them even outbidding the other in confirming his readiness to accept it. A democratically established civilian government in Sudan would imperatively need to reorganize the country’s entire armed forces along the line that the civilian opposition has long called for.

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Translated from the Arabic original published in [Al-Quds al-Arabi](#) on 26 September 2023. Feel free to republish, with mention of the source.