

## Tensions on a Knife's Edge Between Sudan and Ethiopia... What Is Happening?



Over the past few hours, tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia have sharply escalated, against the backdrop of accusations against the latter—alongside the UAE—of involvement in the drone attacks that targeted Khartoum Airport on Tuesday, May 5, in addition to strikes on other sites in the capital, Khartoum, the city of Omdurman, and several surrounding areas.

Khartoum escalated its diplomatic tone in the wake of those accusations by recalling its ambassador to Addis Ababa, Al-Zain Ibrahim, for consultations, amid a growing political and media war of words between the two sides, something that was directly reflected in the level of border tensions between the two countries, which entered a state of cautious anticipation.

The escalation reached its peak when Sudan hinted at using “harsh military force” in response to what it described as Ethiopian violations, raising growing fears of a slide toward an open confrontation whose repercussions could extend across the entire Horn of Africa, given the fragility of the region’s security and political conditions. So where is the crisis between the two neighbors headed?

### Khartoum in the Crosshairs

After months of relative calm that allowed hundreds of thousands of residents to return to their homes, the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, has once again come under attack through drone strikes launched by the Rapid Support Forces militia,

in a development that is fueling growing fears that the city could once again slip back into an atmosphere of violent confrontation.

The attacks included drone strikes on the Wadi سيدنا base in the city of Omdurman, according to a Sudanese military source, while one projectile fell in a residential area adjacent to the airport. At the same time, the Sudanese army announced that it had successfully repelled other attacks targeting various sites inside the capital without significant human or material losses.

In recent days, the RSF militia has shown renewed activity in targeting a number of sites and logistical facilities in an attempt to rebuild its field influence, which has declined markedly as a result of the blows and losses it recently suffered at the hands of the Sudanese army.

This escalation has brought back to the forefront Sudanese fears over disruptive foreign agendas in the conflict and support for the RSF militia, whether through logistical, technical, or military backing, with the aim of compensating for its battlefield losses and strengthening its ability to regain the initiative on some fronts. This threatens to prolong the conflict and further complicate Sudan's security and political landscape.

### Accusing the UAE and Ethiopia

Only hours after the attacks that targeted the Sudanese capital, the announced Sudanese army said it possessed documented evidence proving the involvement of both Ethiopia and the UAE in carrying out the drone attacks. The Sudanese army's official spokesman, Brig. Gen. Asim Awad Abdel Wahab, explained that the drones that targeted military and civilian sites inside Sudan had taken off from Ethiopia's Bahir Dar airport and conducted what he described as "hostile" sorties in Sudanese airspace, targeting several locations, including Khartoum International Airport.

The spokesman added that on March 17, Sudanese air defenses succeeded in downing one of the drones, noting that an analysis of its technical data showed it was an S88 model owned by the UAE and operated from Ethiopian territory.

These accusations come as an extension of a series of previous allegations made by the Sudanese government against Abu Dhabi over supporting the Rapid Support Forces and fueling the internal conflict—accusations the UAE has denied, despite Khartoum's insistence that it possesses evidence and indicators supporting its position.

That Sudanese narrative was further reinforced by an April report issued by a research unit affiliated with Yale University, which spoke of indications that an Ethiopian military base near the Sudanese border had provided support to the

Rapid Support Forces, based on an analysis of satellite images taken between December 2025 and March 2026.

In the same context, the growing rapprochement between Ethiopia and the UAE in recent months has raised mounting concerns within Sudanese circles over the possibility of a regional axis taking shape—one viewed in Khartoum as a threat to the country's security and stability through support for the RSF militia and its empowerment on the ground against the Sudanese army. Those concerns have pushed the Sudanese government to escalate its diplomatic moves and submit urgent complaints to a number of international organizations and bodies.

### Sudan Signals the Military Option

Sudan's response to the attacks targeting Khartoum was not limited to political condemnation or diplomatic measures represented by recalling the Sudanese ambassador to Addis Ababa. It went further, with hints of military escalation, in a clear indication of the seriousness of the phase relations between the two countries are going through.

In this context, escalated Sudanese Foreign Minister Mohi Alddin Salem intensified the official rhetoric, hinting at the possibility of entering into an open confrontation with Ethiopia if hostile operations against Sudan continue. During a press conference, he stressed that "Sudan, with its army and people, is ready for all options in defense of its dignity and national sovereignty."

This escalation is seen as the fiercest between the two sides in recent times, and it also reflects a notable shift in the nature of the crisis, which is no longer confined to political disagreements or traditional border tensions, but has become directly tied to the issue of sovereignty and national security.

For its part, Addis Ababa ignored the Sudanese accusations and considered them part of attempts driven by other parties to implement what it described as "malicious agendas." In its official statements, it focused on accusing Khartoum of supporting the Tigray Front, pushing the crisis toward further political and media escalation amid a mutual exchange of accusations and each side blaming the other for inflaming the internal scene and destabilizing regional stability.

### The Geopolitical Equation

The rapidly escalating tensions between Khartoum and Addis Ababa cannot be understood in isolation from the major transformations the region has witnessed in recent months, amid political fluidity and geopolitical realignment driven by the war in Gaza, all the way to the U.S.-Israeli escalation against Iran. These developments have pushed toward redrawing maps of influence and regional alliances according to equations entirely different from those of just a few years

ago.

In this context, it is difficult to separate what is happening from the UAE's escalating moves in recent months, and what some observers describe as Abu Dhabi's attempt to pursue a regional policy somewhat at odds with the broader Arab mood, especially after the setbacks it faced in several files, including Yemen and Libya, alongside clear Gulf divergences in dealing with the escalation against Iran, and the resulting signs of an Emirati repositioning in a number of arenas of regional influence.

In light of this, observers believe Abu Dhabi is seeking to recover part of its regional influence by reactivating its tools and alliances in some hotspots, starting with the Yemeni arena through reviving the role of the Southern Transitional Council, all the way to the Sudanese scene through support for the Rapid Support Forces militia against the Sudanese army, with the aim of reshuffling the cards and imposing new realities on the ground.

From a broader angle, Sudanese-Ethiopian tensions cannot be separated from the wider context of the reshaping of the balance of power within the Horn of Africa, which in recent years has become one of the most sensitive and competitive geopolitical arenas among regional and international powers, given its highly strategic location linking the Red Sea, East Africa, and the Indian Ocean.

The importance of this strategic region has grown even further with rising tensions related to the security of navigation in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz, making the Horn of Africa an open arena for the reordering of international and regional influence amid an intensifying race to control maritime corridors and vital logistical sites.

### Where Is the Escalation Headed?

This is not the first time relations between Sudan and Ethiopia have reached this level of tension. However, the rapid geopolitical shifts imposed by the regional escalation linked to the war against Iran may give the current crisis greater momentum and push it toward more complex paths compared with previous rounds of escalation, amid changing balances of power and the intertwining of regional and international interests and agendas in the region.

Amid this charged atmosphere, and with the intensifying struggle for influence and overlapping regional calculations, several possible scenarios emerge that could determine the future of the relationship between the two sides. The most likely scenario remains political and diplomatic containment of the crisis through African mediation and international efforts aimed at calming the situation and containing the mutual escalatory rhetoric, especially since both sides understand

the political, military, and economic costs of any open confrontation, at a time when both countries face complex internal challenges that limit their ability to bear the consequences of escalation.

On the other hand, the continuation of mobilization and counter-mobilization, along with ongoing skirmishes and field escalation, could push the crisis to a higher level of tension in the form of limited border clashes, mutual media and political escalation, and perhaps demonstrative military moves without reaching the option of full-scale war, which remains—so far—relatively unlikely, despite its grave danger to the future of the region.

As for the most sensitive scenario, namely slipping into a direct military confrontation, despite its limited likelihood at present, it remains possible if containment efforts fail and mutual escalation continues. Such a scenario could lead to a reshaping of the balance of power across the entire Horn of Africa, given the strategic nature of the conflict and the entanglement of the parties involved.

In sum, the chances of a full-scale military confrontation appear relatively limited in light of regional and international pressure aimed at preventing an explosion of the situation, in addition to the security and economic challenges facing both countries. However, the continuation of attacks, the escalation of political and media rhetoric, and the absence of channels for understanding and de-escalation could gradually raise the level of risk and push the region toward a state of slow slide into a confrontation whose repercussions would be difficult to contain, especially given the fragility of the security and political situation in the Horn of Africa.