

# Sudan war: An open market for weapons and a testing ground for drones

Wars and crises are among the most fertile environments for the arms trade to flourish; the more a front ignites, the more the coffers of military manufacturers swell and the wider the profit margins grow for arms-producing states. In such contexts, countries devastated by war do not remain merely arenas of local conflict, but gradually become open markets for offloading weapons, or field-testing grounds for trying out new combat systems under real wartime conditions.

Sudan today stands as one of the clearest examples of this phenomenon. Since the outbreak of war between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces militia in April 2023, this country, already exhausted economically and politically, has been transformed into an open arena for the flow of dozens of types of advanced weapons, and a violated theater for testing modern arms systems, in a war that has gone beyond the bounds of internal conflict to resemble a miniature international marketplace for weapons and influence.

And documented numerous international organizations and research reports have shown how Sudan, during this war, has become a field of competition among powers and networks involved in manufacturing and supplying arms, where the interests of states, brokers, companies, and regional actors intersect with no real regard for the enormous human cost. The ordinary Sudanese citizen, deprived of security, food, and medicine, is left to pay the price of this arms race, finding himself alone footing the bill for the violation of his land by arms barons and competing agenda-setters.

## Sudan's arms channels

There are three main routes through which weapons have flowed into Sudan during the current war, routes that reveal the extent of the entanglement between the country's inherited internal military stockpiles, regional smuggling networks, and foreign interventions that have fueled the conflict, expanded its scope, and prolonged it.

The first route consists of the Sudanese army's old stockpiles, weapons accumulated over years in the state's arsenal, camps, and military depots. This source is the most prevalent on the battlefield, whether for the army by virtue of its natural possession of these arsenals, or for the Rapid Support Forces militia after it seized a number of military sites, camps, and depots from the beginning of the war. These stockpiles generally include light and medium weapons,

ammunition, some artillery, armored vehicles, and combat vehicles.

The second route is tied to the informal arms market, through open borders, smuggling networks, armed groups, and arms brokers at home and abroad. This route appears more closely linked to the RSF militia, given its longstanding ties to cross-border networks in areas of regional fragility, particularly those coming from Chad, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Libya.

The danger of this route lies in the fact that it is subject to no official oversight, making the continuation of the war dependent on a vast smuggling economy that is difficult to dismantle quickly.

Then comes the third route, the newest and most sensitive, consisting of newly manufactured foreign weapons that have entered the field since the outbreak of the generals' war, whether through official or unofficial channels. This category includes sophisticated, advanced weapons that entered through various gateways involving China, the UAE, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and some European countries.

### Types of armament

The weapons used in the current Sudan war fall into three main levels. The first includes light and conventional weapons, such as assault rifles, medium and heavy machine guns, portable launchers, pistols, and small-arms ammunition. This category is the most widespread on the battlefield, especially inside cities and villages and along highways.

This level also includes armed four-wheel-drive vehicles, armored vehicles, troop carriers, and tactical vehicles used in open battles and rapid movement, in addition to conventional artillery such as mortars, towed guns, multiple-launch rocket systems, and short-range surface-to-surface missiles, as well as the warplanes and helicopters possessed by the Sudanese army.

The second level includes advanced weapons, such as anti-tank missiles and man-portable air defense systems, whose arrival to the Rapid Support Forces militia through several channels has been documented by rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, along with jamming systems, encrypted communications, and surveillance and reconnaissance equipment, all of which represent key tools in enhancing the operational and tactical capabilities of non-state actors.

The third level of armament in the Sudan war is centered on drones, which in recent months have become the most influential weapon and the most important card in deciding many battles. Their use has varied between reconnaissance, target identification, precision strikes, and suicide attacks.

It has recently been observed that the Rapid Support Forces militia has used this weapon to target the infrastructure of many Sudanese areas, reviving the “scorched earth” policy pursued by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, since the beginning of the war, and leading to renewed waves of displacement and a repetition of the catastrophic human scene in conflict zones.

What is striking is that both sides, the Sudanese army and the RSF, have used this weapon. The army, led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, was first to do so, using drones to liberate wide areas from the grip of Hemedti’s militia, before the latter, after obtaining advanced types of these aircraft, regained the ability to recapture some of the liberated areas and achieve a relative balance in the battle, after it had come within just a few steps of being decided in the army’s favor.

### Sources of weapons

The sources of weapons in Sudan vary according to the warring parties and the spheres of influence linked to each side. The armament landscape appears divided into three main axes: sources linked to the Sudanese army, others linked to the RSF militia, and a third that is cross-border or regional in nature. This entanglement reveals the extent of the penetration Sudan’s arena has been subjected to, not only in terms of the flow of weapons, but also in terms of the external agendas that have found in the war a wide gateway to bolster their influence and reshape the balance of power inside the country.

**First: Sources of the Sudanese army’s weapons:** The Sudanese army relies primarily on the state’s official arsenal, an arsenal accumulated over many decades that has formed the backbone of its military capabilities since the beginning of the war. As the regular military institution, the army possessed a broad stockpile of light, medium, and heavy weapons, in addition to armored vehicles, artillery, warplanes, and ammunition.

As the conflict evolved and expanded, other sources entered the line of support for the army, most notably Iran through drones, missiles, and ammunition; Turkey through advanced attack and reconnaissance drones; and Egypt, whose role emerged in logistical and intelligence support, alongside limited imports or arms channels from China, Russia, and other countries aimed at strengthening the army’s ability to hold out and regain the initiative on a number of fronts.

**Second: Sources of the Rapid Support Forces militia’s weapons:** This route represents the most varied and entangled aspect of Sudan’s armament map. Since the beginning of the war, the Rapid Support Forces militia has relied on several parallel sources, foremost among them the Sudanese army’s depots that it seized during the first battles, which provided it with weapons, ammunition, and military equipment that enabled it to expand its field presence.

In addition, the militia has benefited from cross-border regional smuggling networks running through the Sahel and the Sahara and extending from Libya and Chad to the Central African Republic and South Sudan. These networks have provided the RSF with flexible supply routes that are difficult to control or subject to oversight, making them a key factor in the continuation and expansion of the war.

The UAE comes at the forefront of the parties most prominently involved in the RSF's armament file. Several reports have documented Abu Dhabi's role in facilitating the delivery of advanced Chinese-made weapons and French systems to the militia, which has contributed to its staying power on the battlefield and its ability to reorganize its ranks at more than one stage. The Sudanese government has formally accused the UAE, in international forums, of fueling the conflict by arming the militia.

The matter does not stop there. Other reports point to the presence of networks linked to Russia's Wagner Group, as well as smuggling groups and fighters or brokers from Colombia and some African countries, which has shifted the Sudan war from the level of internal conflict to a broader, more internationalized one.

Third: The European presence and arms companies: Europe, too, has had a notable presence in this arms race, not necessarily through direct declared support, but through the appearance of equipment and systems linked to European arms companies on the battlefield.

Reports have documented the presence of weapons and components from European companies, including weapons made by the German company Heckler & Koch, along with French defense systems and advanced British engines and equipment.

In the final analysis, the picture is clear beyond interpretation: the generals' war has turned Sudan into an open arena for settling scores and testing international and regional influence, where the interests of major powers and arms manufacturers intersect on the ground, prolonging the conflict and complicating any path to peace.

Amid this military and political race, the Sudanese citizen alone continues to pay the price of this frenzied conflict, after his country has become the victim of external agendas and competing interests more than it is a party to an internal conflict.