

Saudi Arabia's Sudan Strategy: From Cautious Neutrality to Calculated Engagement





The recent visit by Sudan's Chairman of the Sovereignty Council and Defense Minister, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, to Saudi Arabia has reignited debate about Riyadh's evolving stance on the Sudanese conflict particularly amid significant battlefield shifts in the war against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which have made gains in recent months with continued backing from the United Arab Emirates.

This visit Burhan's third since the war erupted in April 2023 carries particular weight. He met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in a high-level meeting attended by the defense minister, national security advisor, and finance minister, signaling Riyadh's readiness to move beyond passive observation toward a deeper, more calculated involvement in Sudan.

From Saudi Arabia's perspective, the war in Sudan has outgrown its internal dimensions and become a complex geopolitical theater. Its repercussions span from the Red Sea to the heart of Africa, directly intersecting with regional security imperatives and the broader goals of Saudi Vision 2030.

This article seeks to examine Riyadh's approach to the Sudanese crisis at a moment when neutrality appears insufficient. Sudan has become a strategic arena testing Saudi Arabia's ability to safeguard its interests and reshape regional dynamics.

Sudan in Saudi Arabia's Strategic Calculus

Sudan has never been peripheral to Saudi foreign policy. Rather, it has consistently held strategic importance for Riyadh, due to a matrix of geopolitical, security, and economic considerations that make its stability essential not only bilaterally, but for broader regional security.

Foremost among these considerations is Red Sea security. Sudan lies on the sea's western shore, directly opposite the Saudi coast. Its stability is thus critical for maritime safety, port protection, and the secure flow of trade and energy. Any sustained unrest in Sudan risks spilling over into the Red Sea now central to Saudi Arabia's economic vision and future mega-projects.

Sudan also serves as a vital strategic depth in the Horn of Africa. For Riyadh, Khartoum is a key gateway into this increasingly contested region. Saudi involvement there aims to counterbalance competing regional powers and prevent the Horn from falling under the sway of hostile or unstable actors, which could threaten long-term Saudi interests.

Economically, Sudan's vast agricultural and water resources position it as a pivotal partner in achieving Saudi food security goals. Saudi firms have long-standing investments in Sudan's agricultural and livestock sectors, making political and security stability essential to both protect and expand those investments in line with long-term development strategies.

Historically, diplomatic ties between the two countries have remained robust since Sudan's independence, with Riyadh maintaining open channels with successive Sudanese governments. This enduring relationship has enabled Saudi Arabia to act as a relatively accepted mediator and to bolster its role as a regional stabilizer and facilitator of political settlements.

Internationally, Sudan also occupies a shared space in Saudi diplomacy with the United States and other global partners. This enhances Riyadh's diplomatic leverage in broader regional arrangements, especially those tied to Red Sea and Horn of Africa security.

In this context, Sudan represents a convergence point for geography, economics, and regional power projection. Saudi Arabia's strategic worldview rests on a fundamental conviction: Sudanese security is inseparable from Saudi national security and the stability of the Red Sea corridor.

Saudi Arabia's Six-Pronged Approach

Riyadh's approach to the Sudan conflict stems from an evolved understanding of Sudan's place atop its strategic priorities. Saudi Arabia views the country as a high-stakes geopolitical asset that cannot be left to power vacuums or

unregulated regional competition.

As the internal Sudanese power struggle veers toward all-out collapse, Riyadh appears to be entering a moment of strategic reckoning one where passivity is no longer viable.

1. Prioritizing Regional Stability

Saudi Arabia views Sudan as essential to the security of both the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa two corridors vital to energy flows, trade, and maritime security directly linked to Saudi national interests. Continued conflict threatens navigation safety, expands organized crime and trafficking risks, and fuels instability along the western Red Sea coast, transforming Sudan from a potential strategic ally into a sustained security liability.

2. Betting on State Institutions

Saudi Arabia favors the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) as the sole structured institution capable at least in theory of maintaining state cohesion. This stance aligns with a broader Saudi philosophy that rejects the normalization of non-state armed actors, recognizing the regionally contagious and state-fragmenting risks posed by militia politics.

3. Mediator, Not Combatant

Despite this institutional bias, Riyadh is careful to frame itself as a mediator rather than a partisan in the conflict. This is evident in its sponsorship of the Jeddah peace talks alongside Washington, and in its repeated efforts to broker humanitarian truces and ceasefires. This posture allows Saudi Arabia to maintain diplomatic credibility with Sudanese factions and regional and international players alike.

4. Soft Power Through Humanitarianism

Complementing its political strategy is a robust humanitarian engagement. In the war's early weeks, Saudi Arabia coordinated large-scale evacuations across the Red Sea and extended aid to multiple nationalities, leveraging soft power to project an image of responsible leadership focused not solely on geopolitical outcomes, but also on alleviating human suffering.

5. Shielding Sudan from Proxy Escalation

Saudi Arabia remains keenly aware of its regional rivalry with the UAE, especially as Emirati influence in Sudan expands. Yet Riyadh resists turning Sudan into a battleground for open proxy confrontation. Instead, it pursues calculated diplomatic maneuvering, recognizing that escalation risks spiraling into uncontrollable regional chaos with severe strategic costs.

6. Backing a Political Solution

Ultimately, Riyadh sees a negotiated political settlement as the most realistic path to ending the war—even if such a process is slow and complex. A civilian-led transitional government is viewed as the most sustainable route to rebuilding legitimacy and stability, rather than imposing military dominance.

In sum, Saudi Arabia's approach to Sudan is a cautious pragmatism: supporting state institutions, staying engaged diplomatically, emphasizing humanitarianism, and working to insulate Sudan from regional conflict escalation. The goal is not to remake Sudan by force but to prevent its total collapse.

Backing the Sudanese Army

Within this pragmatic framework, Saudi Arabia has deemed support for the SAF under Burhan to be the optimal route for achieving its strategic objectives, aligning with its vision of Sudan as a vital regional partner.

Political and Diplomatic Support

Riyadh has worked to legitimize Burhan through repeated high-level meetings. Since the war began in April 2023, he has visited Saudi Arabia three times (November 2023, March 2025, and December 2025). Saudi officials have also applied pressure on Washington particularly under the Trump administration to designate the RSF as a terrorist group, thereby isolating it internationally and bolstering the army's standing.

Economic and Security Support Aligned with Vision 2030

Saudi Arabia has offered tangible economic aid, including urgent infrastructure projects in Port Sudan launched in March 2025 to shore up government resources and boost its standing with the public. This support aims to counterbalance the UAE's backing of the RSF and reinforce a long-term strategic partnership with Khartoum.

Indirect Military Aid

While there's no concrete evidence of direct arms shipments, multiple reports suggest indirect military assistance channeled through trusted intermediaries such as Egypt and Turkey helping to strengthen the army while avoiding international backlash or overt Gulf rivalries.

Strategic Escalation and Reprioritization

Saudi backing peaked recently when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman asked former President Donald Trump during a Washington visit to intervene directly in the Sudan crisis. This marked Sudan's return to the forefront of US foreign policy and triggered renewed American efforts to stabilize the conflict and the region.

Countering Emirati Influence

The UAE's growing footprint in Sudan has become a major strategic concern for Riyadh one increasingly difficult to ignore. Abu Dhabi's expanding presence in Sudan mirrors its wider assertiveness across Yemen and the Horn of Africa, directly intersecting with Saudi national security interests and raising sensitive questions about regional power balance.

Sudanese analyst Fadil Ibrahim argues that Emirati actions in Sudan are part of a broader regional doctrine that involves empowering non-state actors, often with separatist agendas, to secure control over resource-rich or strategically significant areas.

This pattern, according to Ibrahim, is evident in UAE interventions elsewhere from backing Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya, to arming factions in Puntland, Somaliland, and Jubaland in Somalia. There is also growing evidence that the port of Bosaso in Puntland has served as a supply hub for RSF forces.

In February 2025, the UAE backed an RSF proposal to form a parallel government in territories under its control a move firmly rejected by the SAF and explicitly opposed by Saudi Arabia, which remains committed to Sudan's territorial integrity and legitimate institutions.

Saudi Arabia's growing involvement in Sudan thus marks a strategic shift from declared neutrality to a form of indirect but active engagement. Its aim is to protect its own strategic interests and prevent a regional power imbalance while avoiding open confrontation with the UAE, a partner with whom relations have been increasingly strained, though rarely publicly acknowledged.

Sudan, already located at the intersection of two of the world's most volatile regions the Sahel to the west and the Red Sea-Horn of Africa axis to the east has now become a wide-open arena for geopolitical contestation. Amid this entanglement of agendas, the priorities of ordinary Sudanese have been pushed to the sidelines, as the conflict is managed through the lens of interests rather than state salvation.

As Federico Donelli, a political scientist at Italy's University of Trieste, put it, the current Saudi-Emirati rivalry in the Horn of Africa resembles "a powder keg waiting to explode." So long as Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) retains UAE support and Burhan enjoys Saudi backing, prospects for resolving the war will remain dim.

In this light, the Sudanese conflict stands out as one of the most brutal examples of modern proxy warfare where each side is armed and emboldened by external powers not to resolve the crisis, but to outmaneuver their rivals. And it is Sudan



that bears the cost of a war it neither owns nor controls.

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