

The Sudan War and Its Reflections on the Red Sea: Regional Instability or Search for a New Balance of Power?

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Abstract

Sudan has been at war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) since April 2023. This study seeks to examine the effects of the ongoing war on the security and geopolitical balance of power in the Red Sea. It provides an analysis of the motivations behind the external actors' quest for naval presence on Sudan's Red Sea coast before and after the war. In addition, it analyzes Sudan's strategy on overtures by those external actors. It begins by providing contextual background and analysis of the war and elaborates on its implications for Sudan's neighboring countries in the Red Sea region. The central argument is that the current conflict in Sudan is unlikely to affect the security or reshape the balance of power in the Red Sea region. The paper posits that the recurrent political instability in Sudan and geopolitical rivalry have, on the one hand, shaped Sudan's strategy towards external interests in its eastern coastline and, on the other hand, maintained the current balance of power in the Red Sea region. The conclusion reexamines the main assumptions and reinforces that external actors' competition has crippled Sudan's capability to allow a robust external naval presence on its Red Sea coast. Finally, the paper advocates for a joint collaborative security framework to be agreed upon between Sudan and external actors to maintain security and contribute to the stability of the wider Red Sea region.

Keywords: Sudan, Red Sea, Horn of Africa, Geopolitics, Security

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Sudan Savaşı ve Kızıldeniz'e Yansımaları: Bölgesel İstikrarsızlık mı, Yeni Bir Güç Dengesi Arayışı mı?

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Özet

Nisan 2023'ten bu yana Sudan Silahlı Kuvvetleri (SSK) ile Hızlı Destek Kuvvetleri (HDK) arasında bir savaş yaşanmaktadır. Bu çalışma devam eden savaşın Kızıldeniz'deki güvenlik ve jeopolitik güç dengesi üzerindeki etkilerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, savaş öncesi ve sonrasında dış aktörlerin Sudan'ın Kızıldeniz kıyısında deniz varlığı elde etme yönündeki çabalarının ardındaki motivasyonları analiz etmektedir. Ayrıca Sudan'ın bu dış aktörlerin açılımlarına karşı izlediği stratejiyi ele almaktadır. Çalışma, savaşın bağlamsal bir arka planını sunarak başlamaktadır ve ardından Kızıldeniz bölgesindeki komşu ülkeler açısından sonuçlarını tartışmaktadır. Temel sav Sudan'daki mevcut çatışmanın Kızıldeniz bölgesindeki güvenliği etkilemesinin ya da güç dengesini yeniden şekillendirmesinin olası olmadığı yönündedir. Makale, Sudan'da tekrarlayan siyasi istikrarsızlığın ve jeopolitik rekabetin bir yandan Sudan'ın doğu kıyısındaki dış çıkarlar karşısındaki stratejisini şekillendirdiğini diğer yandan Kızıldeniz bölgesinde mevcut güç dengesini koruduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Sonuç bölümünde temel varsayımlar yeniden ele alınmakta ve dış aktörler arasındaki rekabetin, Sudan'ın Kızıldeniz kıyısında güçlü bir dış deniz varlığına izin verme kapasitesini zayıflattığı vurgulanmaktadır. Son olarak çalışma Sudan ile dış aktörler arasında güvenliğin sağlanması ve Kızıldeniz bölgesinin genel istikrarına katkı sunulması amacıyla ortak bir iş birliğine dayalı güvenlik çerçevesinin oluşturulmasını önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sudan, Kızıldeniz, Afrika Boynuzu, Jeopolitik, Güvenlik.

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حرب السودان وتداعياتها في البحر الأحمر: حالة عدم استقرار إقليمي أم بحث عن توازن قوى جديد؟

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ملخص

تدور الحرب بين القوات المسلحة السودانية وقوات الدعم السريع منذ أبريل/ نيسان 2023. يهدف هذا المقال إلى دراسة تداعيات الحرب المستمرة بين الطرفين على الأمن وتوازن القوى الجيوسياسي في البحر الأحمر. وتسعى الدراسة إلى تحليل دوافع جهود الجهات الخارجية الرامية إلى ترسيخ وجود بحري على ساحل البحر الأحمر في السودان قبل الحرب وبعدها. كما تتناول الدراسة استراتيجية السودان في مواجهة هذه المبادرات. تبدأ الدراسة بتقديم خلفية سياقية للحرب، ثم تناقش نتائجها على الدول المجاورة في منطقة البحر الأحمر. وتتمثل الحجة الأساسية في أن الصراع الجاري حالياً في السودان من غير المرجح أن يؤثر على الأمن أو يعيد تشكيل توازن القوى في منطقة البحر الأحمر. يرى المقال أن حالة عدم الاستقرار السياسي المتكررة والتنافس الجيوسياسية في السودان، من جهة يشكلان استراتيجية السودان تجاه المصالح الخارجية على ساحله الشرقي، ومن جهة أخرى يحافظان على توازن القوى القائم في منطقة البحر الأحمر. ويتناول المقال في قسم النتيجة، الافتراضات الأساسية مرة أخرى، ويؤكد أن التنافس بين الجهات الخارجية قد أضعف قدرة السودان على الحفاظ على وجود بحري خارجي قوي على طول ساحل البحر الأحمر. وأخيراً، توصي الدراسة بإنشاء إطار أمني قائم على التعاون المشترك من أجل ضمان الأمن بين السودان والجهات الخارجية وتقديم المساهمة في الاستقرار العام لمنطقة البحر الأحمر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السودان، البحر الأحمر، القرن الإفريقي، جيوسياسي، الأمن

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Introduction

Sudan's Red Sea coast has long attracted foreign interest, both before and after the 2023 war, with several external actors seeking to establish military or tourism hubs to project power and increase their geopolitical influence. Before the war, Russia had signed an agreement with Sudan to build a military base on the Red Sea coast, while both Türkiye and Qatar sealed deals to develop the port city of Suakin. However, Sudan's fluid political situation impeded the full implementation of these agreements. After the war, both Russia and Iran reportedly sought a naval presence on Sudan's coastline in return for their support to the Sudanese army. Once again, internal political dynamics coupled with geopolitical rivalry have prevented Sudan from moving forward with these agreements.

This paper examines the implications of the current conflict in Sudan on the security and stability in the Red Sea region. It adopts a qualitative approach, analyzing insights from existing literature relevant to the research questions. Secondary data was collected from journal articles, periodicals, newspaper reports, and reputable websites. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relies exclusively on secondary sources, which restricts the depth and originality of insights that might have been gained from primary data. Second, as the conflict in Sudan is ongoing, its final trajectory and broader regional implications remain uncertain. Consequently, data on the positions and interactions of external actors is currently limited or inaccessible. Third, there is a noticeable absence of literature specifically addressing the research question posed by this study, largely due to the evolving nature of the conflict. This paper aims to address this gap by shedding light on the geopolitical competition surrounding Sudan's Red Sea coast and assessing whether the current war has influenced the dynamics of this rivalry. The first section provides a contextual analysis of the ongoing war. The second section reviews the implications of the conflict for three of Sudan's Red Sea neighbors. The final section examines the efforts of external actors to gain a foothold on Sudan's coastline and analyzes Sudan's responses to these overtures.

The Origins of the 2023 War in Sudan

The war that broke out on April 15, 2023, has its roots in four key political developments: the Darfur conflict in 2003, the RSF's involvement in the war against Ansar Allah (commonly known as the Houthis) in Yemen in 2015, the 2019 revolution, and the 2021 military coup. Together, these events transformed the RSF from a subordinate local security force into a prominent

political actor with its own ambitions, independent external relations, and separate sources of financing.

The conflict in Darfur had prompted the then-government to recruit Arab militias to counter rebellions by non-Arab groups in the region.¹ After mobilizing various groups, the RSF was formally established in 2013 as a military organization tasked with fighting alongside the SAF against insurgents of African lineage in Darfur. Led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, commonly known as “Hemedti,” the RSF was later deployed alongside SAF units to fight the Houthis in Yemen in 2015.² This involvement allowed the RSF to cultivate independent relationships with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), significantly boosting its financial capacity.

In 2017, the Sudanese National Assembly passed the RSF Act, which granted the President of the Republic – who also served as the army’s commander-in-chief – the authority to appoint the RSF’s commander. This legislation institutionalized the RSF and formalized its status as a component of the national security sector, operating under the nominal supervision of the army’s commander.

In 2018, pro-democracy groups took to the streets and eventually managed to end former President Bashir’s 30-year reign of power. A power-sharing deal between the civilian forces and the military, the SAF and the RSF, in August 2019, gave rise to the RSF leader Hemedti, who was appointed deputy head of the Transitional Sovereignty Council (TSC). This mixed body comprised civilian representatives, army senior commanders, and the RSF leader.

However, the fragile transition to democracy was upended by a military coup staged jointly by the SAF and the RSF in 2021. While the two military components managed to evict the civilian government, the coup faltered due to widespread civilian resistance, regional and international community rejection, and, more importantly, the competition between the SAF and the RSF to control power and resources. In December 2022, the SAF and the RSF jointly inked the Framework Agreement with the civilian opposition to restore civilian governance, evicting the army from politics and the economy, and establishing a single national army.³ The issue of the single army was highly

1 Beatrice Onamu and Israel Nyadera N. “Paramilitary Forces, Domestic Politics and Conflict: A Case of the Sudan Crisis,” *Obrana a Strategie (Defence and Strategy)* 24, no. 1 (2024).

2 “Sudan Unrest: What are the Rapid Support Forces?” Al Jazeera, April 16, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/16/sudan-unrest-what-is-the-rapid-support-forces>.

3 “Sudan’s Long-Awaited Framework Agreement Signed between Military and Civilian Bodies,” Dabanga Radio TV Online, December 6, 2022, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-s-long-awaited-framework-agreement-signed-between-military-and-civilian-bodies>.

sensitive and contentious as it entailed the reintegration of the RSF into the SAF. However, the two sides failed to agree on two issues: the timetable for the integration process and the command of the new joint force. Concurrently, the SAF and the RSF deployed their troops and reinforced their positions in Khartoum and Merowe in the Northern State, where one of the army's airbases is located. Eventually, the inevitable war erupted in April 2023 in Khartoum and rapidly expanded to different regions in Sudan.

The current war culminates a long history of intra-state wars that started before the country's independence in 1956. However, the war in 2023 is unique compared to the previous conflicts in terms of its intensity, geographical scope, the nature of the belligerents, and the extent of external interference. While Sudan's past wars had pitted the central government against rebel movements in the peripheries of the country, the current war has been fought by two security sector entities sanctioned by the State. Unlike previous conflicts, the war started mainly in the capital Khartoum and rapidly expanded to several regions in the center, west, and south of Sudan. Moreover, the war has witnessed unprecedented external interventions with several actors siding with one of the belligerents and providing different political, military, and financial support. Sudan has officially pointed fingers at the UAE and other countries over their overt support for the RSF. At the same time, the latter accused Egypt of direct involvement in the conflict.

While the SAF has recaptured Khartoum and other areas in central Sudan from the RSF, the conflict is still raging in Kordofan and Darfur regions in western Sudan, where the RSF controls large swathes. The war has triggered one of the most severe displacement, humanitarian, and protection crises in the world today.⁴ Moreover, the conflict poses a credible threat to the broader regional stability in the Horn of Africa, which is currently unstable and could become much more unstable due to the Sudanese crisis.⁵

Impact of the War on Sudan's Neighbors in the Red Sea Region

The war has triggered both security and humanitarian crises in Sudan's neighboring countries, many of which are already grappling with their own challenges, including political instability, insecurity, and economic hardship. Several of these countries continue to host large numbers of Sudanese refugees,

4 "Sudan, 'the Most Devastating Humanitarian and Displacement Crises in the World.'" UN News, February 15, 2025, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/02/1160161>.

5 Estifanos Balew Liyew, "Sudan Conflict Impact on the Horn of Africa Security," *Insight on Africa* 17, no. 2, December 14, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09750878241297264>.

while others are experiencing direct spillover effects from the conflict. To narrow the scope of this study, this section focuses specifically on the implications of the Sudanese war for its neighbors in the Red Sea region – namely Egypt, Ethiopia, and Eritrea.

Egypt

Egypt has been a primary destination for Sudanese refugees fleeing the war. According to the Egyptian foreign ministry, the country has received around 5.5 million Sudanese refugees since the outbreak of the Sudan war.⁶ So far, Egypt has not experienced significant spillover effects from the war. However, in June 2025, the RSF seized control of the triangular border area at the intersection of Sudan, Libya, and Egypt – without crossing into Egyptian territory. While Egypt’s response has been cautious, RSF commander Dagalo expressed a willingness to resolve border disputes with Egypt through dialogue.⁷ Shortly thereafter, Libyan General Khalifa Haftar, whom Sudan accused of supporting the RSF’s offensive along the Sudan-Libya border, met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.⁸ Evidently, Egypt has made some security arrangements with General Haftar and, possibly, with the RSF to avoid any security effects from the conflict in Sudan.

Initially, Egypt adopted a neutral stance on the conflict and urged a peaceful resolution. In July 2023, Egypt hosted a summit between Sudan’s neighbors, which called on the warring parties to commit to a ceasefire, appealed to regional states not to interfere in the conflict, and agreed to facilitate aid delivery.⁹ However, Egypt has eventually backed the SAF in the conflict, given the longstanding relations between the security institutions in the two countries. The country has overtly supported the Sudanese state institutions, Sudan’s territorial integrity, and sovereignty. More importantly, Egypt has called for strengthening the SAF capabilities to preserve the unity of Sudan.¹⁰ With a view to protecting the SAF as the sole legitimate security actor, Egypt has

6 “Egypt Hosts 5.5 Million Sudanese, Bears Brunt of War Fallout: FM Abdelatty,” *Ahram Online*, May 11, 2025, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/546036.aspx>.

7 “Sudan’s RSF Leader Offers Dialogue to Mend Ties with Egypt,” *Sudan Tribune*, June 22, 2025, <https://sudantribune.com/article302168/>.

8 “Sisi Receives Haftar,” *Libyan News Agency*, August 5, 2025, <https://lana.gov.ly/post.php?lang=en&id=335658>.

9 “Egypt Launches New Sudan Mediation Bid at Neighbours’ Summit,” *SABC News*, July 14, 2023, <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/egypt-launches-new-sudan-mediation-bid-at-neighbours-summit/>.

10 “mutamar suhufiun liwazir alkharijiat badr eabd aleati w nazirayh alsuwmalii ‘ahmad faqi w al’iiritri euthman salih,” posted January 11, 2025, by Nile News. YouTube, 13 min., 16 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pllx2UCQZt0>.

reportedly provided military and technical support to the Sudanese army in its war against the RSF, according to media reports.¹¹

Ethiopia

Since April 2023, over 100,000 people have crossed into Ethiopia from Sudan, including nearly 47,000 refugees and asylum-seekers.¹² From a political perspective, Ethiopia has officially remained neutral in the Sudan war and emphasized a peaceful resolution of the conflict.¹³ During the war, the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, maintained a cordial relationship with the commanders of the two warring parties and met them separately. Ethiopia's neutral stance over the conflict in Sudan stems from its intention not to exacerbate the long-standing diplomatic disputes with Sudan and Egypt – first over the filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), and second, its border dispute with Sudan over the Al Fashqa triangle, which is fertile farmland.¹⁴

Eritrea

Eritrea shares a 600-kilometer border with Sudan's eastern regions. It has openly sided with the SAF in the current conflict, positioning itself as one of the SAF's key political and military allies.¹⁵ The country hosted and trained Sudanese armed factions aligned with the SAF, mostly from eastern Sudan.¹⁶ In July 2024, units of the Eritrean Navy docked in Port Sudan as a gesture of the Eritrean leadership's stand with the Sudanese people.¹⁷ More importantly, President Isaias Afwerki, last year, threatened to intervene in the war if the RSF troops reached Sudan's eastern regions on the border with Eritrea, as

11 "Ignoring U.S. Calls for Peace, Egypt Delivered Drones to Sudan's Military," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 14, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/ignoring-u-s-calls-for-peace-egypt-delivered-drones-to-sudans-military-6f7fdcda?mssockid=0f99eef2dedb643d3dbdfacdfd065ab>.

12 "In Ethiopia, UNHCR's Grandi Urges More Support for People Fleeing Sudan," UNHCR, January 31, 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/ethiopia-unhcr-s-grandi-urges-more-support-people-fleeing-sudan>.

13 "Ethiopia's PM Ahmed Visits Sudan, Discusses Peace with Burhan," *Sudan Tribune*, July 10, 2024, <https://sudantribune.com/article288018/>.

14 Kidane Kiros, *The Ongoing War in Sudan and Its Implications for The Security and Stability of the Horn of Africa and Beyond* (Policy Center for the New South, 2024).

15 "Sudan's Military Leader Burhan Briefs Eritrean President Afwerki on War Situation," *The Eastleigh Voice News*, April 11, 2025, <https://eastleighvoice.co.ke/sudan%20crisis/137012/sudan-s-military-leader-burhan-briefs-eritrean-president-afwerki-on-war-situation>.

16 "Eritrea-Backed Militias Deploy in Eastern Sudan," *Sudan War Monitor*, November 15, 2024, <https://sudanwarmonitor.com/p/eritrea-backed-militias-deploy-in>.

17 "Sudan Receives Eritrean Naval Ships," *Sudan Events*, July 26, 2024, <https://sudanevents.com/index.php/2024/07/27/sudan-receives-eritrean-naval-ships/>.

he views the conflict as a threat to Eritrea's national security.¹⁸ Eritrea views East Sudan as an integral part of its national security, given the long border and the presence of shared tribes that straddle the borderline between Sudan and Eritrea.

Red Sea Geopolitical Importance

The Horn of Africa serves as a critical link connecting the security systems of the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific, and the Mediterranean, owing to the strategic significance of the Red Sea and the states that border and rely on it for trade and transit.¹⁹

The Red Sea is a vital maritime route for global commerce, connecting Europe, Africa, and Asia. More importantly, it holds considerable strategic value for the security and stability of the Horn of Africa and the countries along its eastern and western shores. The Red Sea has become a focal point of intense geopolitical competition among numerous external actors in recent years. Driven by the pursuit of power and economic advantage, these actors are engaged in a fierce race to establish military bases and secure port access, aiming to expand their regional geopolitical presence and influence.

External Actors' Quest for the Sudan Red Sea Coast

With approximately 750 kilometers of coastline along the Red Sea, Sudan has recently become a focal point for geopolitical rivalry among regional and international actors seeking to expand their power and influence. Several countries have pursued their security and economic interests by signing agreements with the Sudanese government to build or develop military hubs and ports. However, ongoing political turmoil in Sudan, coupled with geopolitical pressures from external actors, has hindered the full implementation of these agreements. This section examines the persistent efforts by external actors to establish military bases and port facilities along Sudan's Red Sea coast.

Russia

Russia has long sought to strengthen its naval presence in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, with Sudan emerging as its leading candidate for establishing a

18 "Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki Warns Neighboring Countries Supplying Arms to Sudanese Rebels: 'We Are Ready to Defend Ourselves'," BL News, October 29, 2024, <https://blnews.net/2024/10/eritrean-president-isaias-afwerki-warns-neighboring-countries-supplying-arms-to-sudanese-rebels-we-are-ready-to-defend-ourselves/>.

19 "Final Report and Recommendations of the Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena," United States Institute of Peace, October 2020.

military base in the region.²⁰ It has developed deep military relations with the Sudanese security sector, including the intelligence and the army, since the 1960s, with a hiatus in the 1970s during former President Jaafar Nimeiry's rule (1971-1985).²¹

During former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir's era, security and military cooperation between Sudan and Russia intensified. In 2017, the two countries agreed to grant Russia a naval presence on Sudan's Red Sea coast. This cooperation was further solidified in 2020, when they signed an agreement allowing Russia to station up to four naval vessels – including nuclear-powered ships – in Sudan for a period of 25 years.²²

With the eruption of the war in 2023, Russia ultimately threw its weight behind the Sudanese army, despite reports that it had maintained ties with both sides in the conflict. In February 2025, Sudan's then Foreign Affairs Minister, Ali Yousif, visited Moscow and announced that Sudan and Russia had reached a final agreement to establish a Russian naval base in Port Sudan on the Red Sea.²³ Shortly thereafter, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, confirmed that talks with Sudan regarding the potential base were ongoing but denied that a concrete agreement had yet been finalized.²⁴

The uncertainty surrounding the establishment of a Russian naval base in Sudan highlights the geopolitical complexity and sensitivity of the issue. It appears that the SAF-led government has reconsidered its position on the naval facility due to pressure from Western countries and their regional allies. In 2022, the U.S. Ambassador to Sudan, John Godfrey, warned that reviving the agreement with Russia would isolate Sudan from the international community and undermine the country's interests.²⁵ Furthermore, granting Russia a naval presence on the Red Sea would likely provoke opposition from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, both of which are key allies of the Sudanese army in the

20 Neil Melvin, "The Foreign Military Presence in the Horn of Africa Region," (SIPRI, April 2019), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/sipribp1904_2.pdf.

21 Salma Abdalla, "Emerging Stage for Great Power Competition: Russia's Influence in Sudan amid Political Turmoil," *Security in Context*, n.d., <https://www.securityincontext.org/posts/emerging-stage-for-great-power-competition-russias-influence-in-sudan-amid-political-turmoil>.

22 "Sudan Greenlights First Russian Naval Base in Africa," *Military Africa*, February 14, 2025, <https://www.military.africa/2025/02/sudan-greenlights-first-russian-naval-base-in-africa/>.

23 "Sudan, Russia Agree on Port Sudan Naval Base," *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, February 13, 2025, <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5111715-sudan-russia-agree-port-sudan-naval-base>.

24 "Russia Denies Deal for Sudan Naval Base," *Sudan Tribune*, June 25, 2025, <https://sudantribune.com/article286891/>.

25 "US Warns Sudan of Consequences If It Hosts Russian Military Base," *Anadolu Agency*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/us-warns-sudan-of-consequences-if-it-hosts-russian-military-base/2696410>.

current conflict. Given the circumstances, it is reasonable to conclude that Russia has so far failed to persuade Sudan to finalize the naval deal – a deal that could have reshaped the balance of power in the Red Sea by strengthening Moscow’s influence in Africa and the Indian Ocean while challenging Western and regional powers.²⁶

Iran

Iran’s desire to expand its presence in the Horn of Africa, including the Red Sea region, is driven by its need to circumvent international sanctions that have weakened its economy, the imperative to broaden its network of foreign alliances, and the ambition to establish strategic depth in one of the world’s most militarily significant regions.²⁷

Sudan had been the key ally of Iran in the Horn of Africa since the ascendance of the Islamists to power in 1989. The two countries were closely collaborating at political and military levels until 2016, when Sudan abruptly severed diplomatic ties with Iran following an attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran.²⁸ However, in November 2023, Sudan and Iran fully restored their diplomatic relations after a seven-year hiatus. The move was primarily triggered by the need for military support from the SAF in their war against the RSF.

Seeking a more robust presence in the Red Sea region, Iran reportedly attempted to convince the SAF-led government to allow Iranian naval presence on the Red Sea coast. Nevertheless, the Sudanese government has turned down the request, citing possible backlash from the U.S. and Israel.²⁹ While this account has not been independently verified, it is plausible that Sudan would reject such an offer from Iran, given its strong alliance with Egypt and Saudi Arabia – both historical rivals of Iran and key backers of the SAF.

The recent attacks on Iran by the U.S. and Israel are likely to weaken Iran’s capabilities as a regional powerhouse and cripple its geopolitical ambitions in Africa, including in Sudan. Granting permission to Iran to establish a permanent naval base in Port Sudan would have marked a major shift in balance

26 Natalia Tsamalashvili, “Russia’s Naval Base in Port Sudan: A Gateway to Africa and the Indian Ocean,” *Horn*, March 5, 2025, <https://horninstitute.org/russias-naval-base-in-port-sudan-a-gateway-to-africa-and-the-indian-ocean/>.

27 Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco, “Iran and the Horn of Africa: The Stakes and Hurdles of Building a Strategic Foothold,” *Gulf International Forum*, February 16, 2023, <https://gulifif.org/iran-and-the-horn-of-africa-the-stakes-and-hurdles-of-building-a-strategic-foothold/>.

28 “Sudan Severs Diplomatic Ties with Iran,” *Sudan Tribune*, January 4, 2016, <https://sudantribune.com/article55954/>.

29 “Iran Tried to Persuade Sudan to Allow Naval Base on Its Red Sea Coast,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-tried-to-persuade-sudan-to-allow-naval-base-on-its-red-sea-coast-77ca3922>.

of power in the region but Sudan unwillingness to pursue the deal has thus far maintained the current state of affairs in the Red Sea.

Türkiye

Türkiye's proactive engagement in the Horn of Africa, through infrastructure, military presence, and diplomatic engagement, marks a new era of geopolitical competition in the region. From the Ethiopia-Somalia agreement to Sudan's political crisis, Ankara has positioned itself as a key player.³⁰

Sudan maintained close strategic relations with Türkiye while in 2017, the two countries signed several agreements, including rehabilitating the city of Suakin, an ancient Ottoman port on the Red Sea coast. The agreement stipulated a 99-year lease deal for Suakin to be developed by Türkiye as a tourism hub.³¹ Following the 2019 revolution, the agreement on Suakin remained unchanged, despite reports that the former civilian government had attempted to revoke it.

After the current war broke out, Türkiye has been advocating a cessation of hostilities and a peaceful resolution to the conflict while emphasizing Sudan's territorial integrity and sovereignty. In December 2024, the country proposed an initiative to mediate between Sudan and the UAE,³² which is primarily seen as the main backer of the RSF. However, the initiative has not yielded positive outcomes. While the Suakin agreement remains valid, no further steps have been taken to operationalize the deal after the war.

UAE

Driven by commercial potential, regional security interests, and a desire to shape the future of maritime trade, the UAE has been the most assertive of Gulf states in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa.³³ The UAE had sought to secure a naval presence and influence on Sudan's Red Sea coast. In December 2022, Sudan and the UAE struck a preliminary agreement of \$6 billion to develop

30 "Turkey's Grand Play in the Horn of Africa: A Rising Power in a Contested Region," Horn Review, January 30, 2025, <https://hornreview.org/2025/01/30/turkeys-grand-play-in-the-horn-of-africa-a-rising-power-in-a-contested-region/>.

31 "Suakin: 'Forgotten' Sudanese Island Becomes Focus for Red Sea Rivalries," Middle East Eye, March 19, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/suakin-forgotten-sudanese-island-becomes-focus-red-sea-rivalries>.

32 "Türkiye's Erdogan Offers to Mediate in Sudan-UAE Disputes," Al Jazeera, December 13, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/13/turkiyes-erdogan-offers-to-mediate-in-sudan-uae-disputes>.

33 Zack Vertin, *Red Sea Rivalries: The Gulf, the Horn of Africa & the New Geopolitics of the Red Sea*, (The Brookings Institution, 2019), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Red-Sea-Rivalries-The-Gulf-The-Horn-and-the-New-Geopolitics-of-the-Red-Sea-1.pdf>.

and operate the Abu Amama port on the Red Sea. The deal includes the construction of an airport, a big agricultural scheme, and dozens of railways and roads to link the Nile to the Red Sea.³⁴

Shortly after, the war erupted and disrupted the implementation of the project. The SAF-led government then openly accused the UAE of backing and arming the RSF in the war. In November 2024, the government scrapped the Abu Amama port deal due to the UAE's involvement in the war with the RSF. Sudan Finance Minister, Gebreil Ibrahim, stated that Sudan will not give the UAE a single centimeter on the Red Sea coast.³⁵

Given the current diplomatic dispute between Sudan and the UAE over the latter's alleged support for the RSF, it is not envisaged that the UAE would gain access to the Sudanese Red Sea coast in the near future. Hence, the UAE currently, and probably beyond that point, is not in a position to reshape the balance of power, specifically with regard to Sudan's eastern coastline.

Egypt

With the longest coastline on the Red Sea – measuring 1,941 kilometers – Egypt has been a key player in the security and governance of the region. The security of the Red Sea is a sensitive national security concern for Egypt, which heavily depends on the revenues generated by the Suez Canal, a vital waterway linking the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea.

While Egypt has not sought to establish a foothold on Sudan's Red Sea coast, it remains highly vigilant regarding other external actors' efforts in the region. In February 2025, following a meeting with his Sudanese counterpart, Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty emphasized that the security of the Red Sea should be the responsibility of the countries bordering the sea. Abdelatty stressed that non-coastal nations should not participate in the governance or security arrangements of the Red Sea.³⁶ These remarks were likely made in response to Sudan's engagement with Russia over the naval hub deal, which was agreed in Moscow a few days before Abdelatty's meeting with his Sudanese counterpart.

34 "Shadow Games on the Red Sea as Scramble for Sudan's Ports Intensifies," Middle East Eye, February 24, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-global-contest-centre-red-sea-scramble-intensifies>.

35 "Sudan Scraps \$6 Billion UAE Port Deal, Citing RSF Support," Sudan Tribune, November 3, 2024, <https://sudantribune.com/article292879/>.

36 "Egypt Rejects Any Military Presence from Outside Countries Bordering the Red Sea: FM," Egypt Independent, January 12, 2025, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/egypt-rejects-any-military-presence-from-outside-countries-bordering-the-red-sea-fm/>.

Egypt's response to the Sudan-Russia naval facility agreements underscores its determination to preserve the strategic balance of power in the Red Sea and to prevent any non-coastal actor from altering the region's power dynamics.

Qatar

Qatar has pursued geopolitical influence in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea like other Gulf countries through aid, economic cooperation, and conflict mediation. The country was one of the key allies of the Islamists in Khartoum until the revolution in 2019. In 2018, Sudan and Qatar signed a \$4 billion deal to develop the Suakin seaport on the Red Sea with a plan to complete the project by 2020.³⁷ However, the political turmoil in Sudan in late 2018 and the revolution in 2019 ended the agreement, which remains unimplemented.

Recent realignment between Sudan and Qatar and the latter's pronounced support for the Sudanese government may enhance Qatar's opportunities to access Sudan's Red Sea coast. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether Qatar would capitalize on its backing for the Sudanese army and revive the deal for Suakin port or even seek greater influence in the Red Sea.

Conclusion

Sudan's Red Sea coastline has attracted numerous external actors seeking to enhance their geopolitical influence by securing strategic footholds in the region. Russia, the UAE, and Iran have all signed agreements with Sudan to build military bases or develop seaports along its Red Sea coast. However, none of these deals have been fully implemented due to a combination of internal and external factors. First and foremost, Sudan's persistent political instability has continually hindered the execution of these agreements. Additionally, the post-revolution civilian government reportedly suspended the deals signed with Türkiye and Qatar for the development of Suakin port, likely due to perceived ideological and political ties between these countries and Sudan's pre-revolution government.

Secondly, despite initial agreements, geopolitical rivalry has prevented Russia and Iran from establishing a full naval presence on Sudan's Red Sea coast. Egypt has openly rejected any role for external actors outside the Red Sea littoral states, insisting that security and governance of the Red Sea remain confined to its bordering countries. Reportedly, Saudi Arabia and the U.S.

37 "Sudan, Qatar ink \$4B Deal to Develop Suakin Seaport," Anadolu Agency, March 26, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/sudan-qatar-ink-4b-deal-to-develop-suakin-seaport/1099672#>.

have adopted the same position, collectively opposing any Iranian or Russian strategic foothold on Sudan's coastline.

Thirdly, Sudan's strategy in managing external actors' ambitions on its Red Sea coast has ensured that the regional balance of power remains unchanged. While Sudan initially agreed to allow Iranian and Russian naval presence, it ultimately retreated under pressure from external powers that view Iran and Russia as threats to their influence in the region. Sudan has skillfully leveraged its Red Sea coastline to secure military and political support without granting full naval access to any actor. This bargaining approach – signing agreements without fully implementing them – has effectively maintained the flow of external support while preserving the existing balance of power.

The analysis of the overall context in Sudan has indicated that the current war has not affected the security and the balance of power in the Red Sea. With the main battlefields shifting from the center of Sudan to the western fronts in Kordofan and Darfur, and without major changes in the trajectory of the war, the prospects of any impacts on the Red Sea region have become highly improbable. This is mainly because, following the recapture of center of the county from the RSF, the SAF does not need to offer Sudan's Red Sea coast for external actors in return for military and financial support.

To avert spillover from the Sudan war and to maintain peace and stability in the Red Sea region, a cessation of hostilities coupled with a political settlement is an indispensable ingredient for a durable peace in Sudan. Additionally, a collaborative security strategy and framework based on mutual interests and jointly agreed upon between Sudan and the external actors is essential to maintain security and stability on Sudan's Red Sea coast.

Finally, the main question of this study definitely merits further in-depth investigations. Future research could be tailored to cover individual countries' geopolitical ambitions on Sudan's Red Sea coast and how that is linked to the wider security governance and architecture of the Red Sea region as a whole.

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