

# Egypt’s Approach to Conflict in Sudan: A Simmering Crisis

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## With no end in sight, the Sudan conflict will put significant pressure on Egypt's economic, political, and security infrastructure.

The armed conflict in Sudan between the forces of General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and powerful paramilitary leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) poses a multidimensional threat to stability and security in Egypt—one which will only increase as the conflict drags on. The heavy influx of Sudanese migrants, the potential threat of cross-border incursions by armed groups, and reinforced water security fears have all been intensified by the conflict next door. Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi has few viable options to effectively tackle these threats of instability emanating from Sudan, especially considering that the UAE is supporting the opposing camp in this intractable conflict.

### The Growing Migrant Problem

Egyptian officials are openly concerned that the country will be overwhelmed by an inflow of Sudanese migrants. As of June 7, Egypt was hosting approximately 210,000 Sudanese refugees or asylum seekers, according to government data ([https://reliefweb.int/report/egypt/unhcr-egypt-sudan-emergency-response-update-9-june-2023#:~:text=More%2520than%2520210%252C000%2520Sudanese%2520have,is%25205%252C565%2520\(28%2520May\)\)](https://reliefweb.int/report/egypt/unhcr-egypt-sudan-emergency-response-update-9-june-2023#:~:text=More%2520than%2520210%252C000%2520Sudanese%2520have,is%25205%252C565%2520(28%2520May)))) featured in a UNHCR report. Even prior to the conflict, Egypt hosted approximately nine million international migrants, of which four million are Sudanese.

Having to contend with this continuous flow of migrants has come at an especially bad time for Egypt as the country struggles to manage an intense economic crisis marked by a heavy external debt burden and high inflation. The cost of humanitarian provisions, schooling, and other services for refugees registered with the UNHCR is increasing, though international aid falls well short of local needs.

The inflow of Sudanese migrants poses more than an unsustainable financial burden on Egypt. Most infrastructure in Cairo is buckling, and the country’s water resources are already over-exploited. A spike in demand for employment may worsen the already bleak prospects for millions of unemployed Egyptians. While Egypt has toughened its visa process along its southern border, Cairo may ultimately be forced to formally ‘close’ the frontier to new migrants, causing a greater proportion of families to enter Egypt unregistered.

The migrant crisis additionally threatens the political capital Egypt has earned in Europe. In contrast to neighboring countries such as Libya, Algeria and Tunisia, Egypt has until now largely prevented and deterred migration from its shores across the Mediterranean to Europe. But Egyptian authorities may find it more difficult to sustain this record as its migrant population expands.

### Terrorism and Water Security

The war between Hemedti and al-Burhan has in the meantime exposed Egypt to an increased risk of cross-border incursions by armed groups, weapons smugglers, and human traffickers. Irrespective of Egyptian pressure, al-Burhan may find himself forced to weaken or neglect security measures along the Sudanese side of the border with Egypt as he concentrates his military resources on defeating Hemedti’s Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Although the Egyptian side is heavily militarized, the 1,276 kilometer-long frontier is far from impenetrable.

Egypt knows all too well how jihadists are able to exploit partial or full vacuums caused by armed conflict and weak governance in neighboring states. The al-Qaeda-linked al-Mourabitoun group in Libya [launched \(https://apnews.com/article/f926b1d6caad4adbb6f7ab99335e1977\)](https://apnews.com/article/f926b1d6caad4adbb6f7ab99335e1977) cross-border incursions against Egyptian security forces over the course of several years. Al-Mourabitoun was effectively neutralized after the capture of Hisham Ashmawi—its resourceful leader and former Egyptian special forces officer—in October 2018, but not before the group pulled off numerous deadly attacks.

Although there are no jihadist groups with a strong presence in Sudan which Egypt considers to be tier-1 targets, the reported [release \(https://eeradicalization.com/sudan-on-the-brink-the-prospect-of-terrorists-exploiting-the-current-instability/\)](https://eeradicalization.com/sudan-on-the-brink-the-prospect-of-terrorists-exploiting-the-current-instability/) of a book by an al-Qaeda ideologue which justifies violent jihad against the Sudanese state is worrying. So are calls from pro-Islamic State Telegram channels for supporters to exploit the conflict and seize arms. The Egyptian government is also reportedly concerned that Sudan’s Muslim Brotherhood will regain strength amid the raging conflict and seek to destabilize Sisi’s rule by any means.

The war in Sudan exacerbates an even bigger strategic concern for Cairo—uninhibited access to water from the Nile River, which accounts for at least 95% of Egyptian consumption. Sudan’s conflict has further weakened Egypt’s already poor attempt to influence the management of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) which sits on the Blue Nile. The violent struggle between al-Burhan and Hemedti has deprived President Sisi of a steady partner to lobby both regionally and internationally for the protection of Egypt’s and Sudan’s water security interests as downstream countries.

The extent to which Egypt depends on Sudan to pressure Ethiopia should not be exaggerated, though. Coordinated efforts by Sisi and al-Burhan to achieve legally binding concessions on GERD water flows from Addis Ababa during periods of drought delivered next to no results prior to the current conflict in Sudan. Some observers believe that Cairo had already resigned itself to what is effectively a fait accompli on GERD. As intensified water stress looms, Egypt is working to expand its desalination capacity and is [encouraging \(https://www.reuters.com/article/egypt-climatechange-water-farming/feature-be-prepared-with-water-scarcer-egypt-pushes-farmers-to-use-much-less-idUSL8N2G4360\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/egypt-climatechange-water-farming/feature-be-prepared-with-water-scarcer-egypt-pushes-farmers-to-use-much-less-idUSL8N2G4360) farmers to abandon water intensive practices, albeit with mixed results.

### Egypt Has Limited Room to Maneuver

President Sisi has made it clear that Egypt is committed to coordinating closely with states in the region to bring peace and stability to Sudan. Although the president publicly advocates for a peace deal between Hemedti and al-Burhan, Sisi would prefer Hemedti to be permanently neutralized as an actor and for al-Burhan's camp to preside fully in Sudan. In contrast to Hemedti, who Sisi sees as a rogue operator, al-Burhan and Sisi relate on a number of issues, and have worked closely together in the past. Like Sisi, al-Burhan is a military man through and through.

Egypt's ability to influence events in Sudan has been hampered by its diminished clout in the region and the number of external players who already sit in the Hemedti camp. These include Russia's Wagner Group—which operates a gold processing plant in RSF-controlled territory—Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA), and most importantly of all, the UAE. Though reports have suggested that Egypt is providing military hardware and assistance to Sudan, this information is still hotly debated. The reality is that Egypt has not launched a direct, aggressive military campaign in support of al-Burhan.

This is not just because Egypt does not want to get sucked into a costly quagmire. Given Egypt's urgent need for Emirati cash and investment to prop up its volatile economy, Cairo is not in a position to lock horns with its long-time ally Abu Dhabi. Case in point, the 3 billion USD deal between the Egyptian government and the IMF is linked to another 10 billion USD coming from Egypt's Gulf allies over the next five years.

Abu Dhabi and Riyadh are reportedly frustrated by the Egyptian government's failure to engage in serious structural economic reforms, and don't see eye-to-eye on the valuation of Egyptian state assets in which they are looking to invest. Now, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are less inclined than in the past to give the Sisi administration a free pass and expect to eventually sell their stakes in Egyptian companies for a good profit.

The negative impacts of the conflict in Sudan are acutely felt by the UAE, and Abu Dhabi has a strong incentive to encourage peace. Sudan's position at the nexus of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa makes it an important factor in the UAE's trade, commerce and geopolitical standing. This was made abundantly clear by the inking of a [Heads of Terms agreement \(https://www.adportsgroup.com/en/news-and-media/2022/12/13/ad-ports-group-and-invictus-consortium-signs-agreement-with-the-gov-of-the-republic-of-sudan%23:-:text=Abu%2520Dhabi%252C%2520UAE%2520%25E2%2580%2593%252013%2520December,economic%2520zone%2520assets%2520in%2520Sudan.\)](https://www.adportsgroup.com/en/news-and-media/2022/12/13/ad-ports-group-and-invictus-consortium-signs-agreement-with-the-gov-of-the-republic-of-sudan%23:-:text=Abu%2520Dhabi%252C%2520UAE%2520%25E2%2580%2593%252013%2520December,economic%2520zone%2520assets%2520in%2520Sudan.) between the government of Sudan and a consortium led by AD Ports Group and Invictus Investment in December 2022, which give the latter "the right to develop, manage, and operate port and economic zone assets in Sudan."

While the Emirate's close links to Hemedti remain a source of friction with Egypt, they can potentially be useful. Though initially reluctant to accept Emirati mediation, Cairo [agreed \(https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/04/20/Sudan-s-RSF-says-it-handed-over-27-Egyptian-soldiers-to-IRC\)](https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/04/20/Sudan-s-RSF-says-it-handed-over-27-Egyptian-soldiers-to-IRC) for Abu Dhabi to broker the release of 27 Egyptian armed forces personnel held by Hemedti's forces in April. Egypt understands the importance of Hemedti to the UAE given their long-standing client-patron relationship, marked by the gold trade and the large number of fighters Hemedti committed to the Saudi-UAE military campaign in Yemen.

While Egypt, the UAE, and other external powers will continue to call for peace in Sudan, al-Burhan and Hemedti are unlikely to permanently desist from hostilities in the short term, especially considering the zero-sum mindsets held by both and the external support each side continues to enjoy. The multiplicity of threats emanating from Sudan are likely to get worse before they get any better for Egypt.



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