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# Sudan is sliding towards collapse, and regional extremists see an opportunity



With each new day of conflict, Sudan is sliding into a scenario some countries in Africa and the Middle East have experienced: permanent civil war, state fragmentation, and general lawlessness.

There have been continuing conflicts over supremacy between two former partners, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the armed forces, and General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary group.

They clashed amid internal negotiations over the renewal of the democratic transition, which they interrupted two years ago with a coup d'état.

Hundreds of people have died in the clashes in Sudan. Calculations indicate that both sides intend to end conflict with a “zero-sum game”, that is, the triumph of one side and the collapse of the other.

Like many other countries in the region, Sudan has a history of instability, upheavals, and a lack of willingness to resolve conflicts through compromise.

Generations of Sudanese grew up in severe international isolation. Sudan was a hub for the activities of Osama bin Laden during the 1990s and particularly during the conflict in the western region of Darfur in the 2000s, where government and paramilitary forces committed serious crimes.

## Appeals for peace have been in vain

In the first week of the conflict, international peace efforts have not moved beyond appeals. So far, no initiative seems likely to succeed.

On the first day, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appealed to the two conflicting generals to “immediately cease hostilities, restore calm and begin a dialogue to resolve the crisis”. The US also called for a ceasefire, saying they are in “direct contact”

with both conflicting Sudanese generals to convince them to stop hostilities.

According to John Kirby, a spokesperson for the National Security Council, the US has been working on a solution with partners from the African Union and the Arab League.

There is a significant list of international parties interested in Sudan. It includes the EU and major regional players, such as Egypt and the Gulf countries; also regional organisations - the African Union and the bloc of East African states, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

But effective peace mediation is still not in sight. The intertwining and opposing interests in Sudan and the region could make attempts to reach any peaceful solution complicate the situation more than it already is.

## Spillover of conflict in the region

Sudan has been sliding into a long-term conflict, which, in the absence of an international response, threatens to spill over into neighbouring countries.

“What happens in Sudan will not stay in Sudan”, said Alan Boswell, from the International Crisis Group. According to Mr Boswell, Chad and South Sudan are exposed to the greatest risk of the initial spillover of the conflict. The course of events, inevitably reminiscent of Somalia or Libya during their periods of internal conflict and subsequent state collapse, puts Sudan at risk of being exploited by extremists and terrorists.

Sudan is part of the sub-Saharan African region, which has been the epicentre of global Islamic extremism for years. Half of all terrorist murders in the world have taken place in this area, according to a UN report published last February.

Jihadists have been active in Sudan's closest neighbourhood, Al-Shabab in Somalia, as one

of the most powerful affiliates of Al-Qaeda, or ISIS in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which shares the South Sudan buffer zone with Sudan.

In a severe conflict like now, particularly in the security vacuum that will arise, there are almost no obstacles for the surrounding extremist groups to get involved in the Sudanese conflict and further radicalise it.

## International intervention is not in sight

There are more or less active partner organisations ready to help radicalisation in the entire belt of Sudan. For example, the distance will not be crucial for the ISIS factions in Nigeria.

The prospects for escalation at this point are much higher than for ending the conflict and turning to initiatives for peace and stabilisation.

Escalation threatens to take the form of Islamist extremism, which threatens the entire Sahel region with a new wave of violence and terrorism.

Potential international intervention from any side - the West or influential regional coalitions - does not seem to be a theoretical option, and none of the stakeholders have discussed this publicly.

In such circumstances, Sudan and its immediate surroundings are exposed to collapse and a refugee crisis, particularly to destruction by Islamic militants, who have a new, significant opportunity in Sudan.