



Will Sudan's new centre endure as a periphery? The implications of moving the capital to eastern Sudan

Awet T. Weldemichael

October 2025

XCEPT

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

About the author

Awet T. Weldemichael is Professor of African and World History at Queen's University in Canada. He has published widely on the contemporary history and politics of the Horn of Africa and Southeast Asia, including *Third World Colonialism and Strategies of Liberation* and *Piracy in Somalia*. He is a member of the College of New Scholars of the Royal Society of Canada.

About XCEPT

This publication is issued by the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development. XCEPT brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, to inform policies and programmes that support peace. For more information, visit www.xcept-research.org or contact us at info@xcept-research.org.

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the UK government.

This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) should be credited, with the date of the publication and reference to XCEPT. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material in this document, the author(s) will not be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of this document.

Cover image: Saganeb lighthouse, Port Sudan.
Aleksandra Tokarz / Shutterstock.

Suggested citation: Weldemichael, Awet. "Will Sudan's new centre endure as a periphery? The implications of moving the capital to eastern Sudan". London: XCEPT, 2025.



Contents

Executive summary	4
Introduction	5
1. Sudan's centre-periphery relations: discourse and reality	7
2. Weaponising historic neglect in the run-up to war	9
3. Housing the centre without becoming one	14
Conclusion	20
References	22

Executive summary

- Sudan's peripheries have been consistently marginalised since the country's independence, with power structures in both the centre and periphery collaborating to preserve elite interests. Nevertheless, centre-periphery relations remain fluid, with marginalisation also present in the centre and influence exerted by the periphery.
- Port Sudan, the capital of Red Sea state, is Sudan's largest port and is thus vital to the national political and economic core. Despite this, its largely impoverished population remains marginalised.
- Shortly after the outbreak of civil war in April 2023, what remained of the Sudanese state relocated to Port Sudan from Khartoum. The initial lack of enthusiasm expressed by eastern Sudanese to the centre's move and its call to arms stemmed from past negative experiences with the Sudanese military, fear of the country's deposed Islamist leaders returning to power, and concern that the conflagration might spread into their territory.
- Hosting the seat of government has added new layers of complexity to eastern Sudan's relationship with the centre. The administrative and demographic pressures of turning a mid-sized port city into a national capital has stretched Port Sudan's infrastructure to the limit, exacerbating its inhabitants' economic woes.
- The unprecedented transfer of the centre to the periphery provides an opportunity to disrupt Sudan's decades-long history of unequal centre-periphery relations. Rather than pursuing the potential redistribution of power and resources, however, governance from Port Sudan has thus far prioritised winning the war.
- The historic grievances of the indigenous Beja and non-Beja communities have fallen by the wayside, with local administration of the Red Sea state and the city of Port Sudan sidelined. Without a purposive shift towards inclusive, accountable, decentralised governance, it seems inevitable that the state will simply re-entrench the inequalities that historically fuelled Sudan's centre-periphery divide.
- The survival of Sudan as a unified country may now rest on Sudanese actors embracing the emergence of multiple centres (starting with institutionalising Port Sudan as a co-capital or administrative capital) under the umbrella of an inclusive but devolved national administrative architecture.

Introduction

In April 2023, civil war broke out in Khartoum, leading to the implosion of Sudan's centre and the relocation of what remained of the state to the country's eastern periphery. Comprising Gederef, Kassala, and Red Sea states, as well as parts of River Nile state (see Figure 1), eastern Sudan exemplifies the centre-periphery dynamic that has been a defining feature of modern Sudanese history. Despite its vast agricultural lands, mineral wealth, and a strategic maritime outlet, the region has remained underdeveloped and impoverished since Sudan's independence in 1956. In July 2023, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Transitional Sovereignty Council were compelled to relocate the seat of government to Port Sudan, the capital of the Red Sea state, and face up close the decades of Khartoum's ruinous neglect of the peripheries.

This paper explores the implications of the shift from Khartoum to Port Sudan in terms of Sudan's geographical inequalities and the historic dynamics underlying them. More specifically, it asks whether this unprecedented move heralds a realignment – or at least readjustment – in the spatial balance of resource control, power, and governance. In exploring whether the displacement of the centre to the periphery (in broad terms) has fundamentally disrupted Sudan's longstanding centre-periphery

relations, the paper revisits eastern Sudan's historic relationship with the centre, analyses the region's conflict dynamics since former Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir's downfall in 2019, examines the process and outcome of the central government's eastward move, and offers a preliminary analysis of wartime governance in and from Port Sudan. Although it falls beyond the scope of the paper, it should also be noted that the Sudanese state's spatial displacement has significantly affected its relations with the country's immediate neighbours to the north and east, i.e. Egypt, Eritrea, and Ethiopia.

This paper argues that the recent chaos seen in eastern Sudan, as well as the region's history of marginalisation since independence, is in large part due to the persistent failure of Khartoum's ruling elites to integrate the country's peripheries. Early signs indicate that the centre's move eastwards has further diminished the importance attached to the peripheries' concerns, interests, and personnel. Instead, Sudan's governing authority, the Transitional Sovereignty Council, and the SAF have prioritised winning the civil war. Thus, although the shift may have symbolically altered the country's political geography, it has not led to the state being decentralised or rendered more inclusive. In other words, the centre has moved to the periphery without centring the periphery.



Figure 1 - Eastern Sudan

It would nevertheless be premature to rule out the possibility of establishing more balanced relations between the onetime centre and its peripheries – or even entering an era of multiple centres. The peripheries possess critical economic infrastructure/centres, not least Port Sudan itself, which is the country's only maritime outlet. Moreover, elites in the periphery are not without agency. Even so, without a swift course correction, the pattern of relations seen over the past seven decades will almost certainly persist.

This paper forms part of the author's wider and ongoing research into eastern Sudan's conflict dynamics. Starting in mid-2024, the data collection has involved more than two dozen consultations and focus group discussions with Sudanese professionals, politicians, civil society and traditional leaders, scholars, ordinary citizens, and activists. Most of the consultations were carried out in person in Cairo, Addis Ababa, and Nairobi, although some were carried out remotely via phone with individuals in Sudan. The anonymised firsthand data was then synthesised with voluminous media coverage (in different languages), policy reports, and relevant scholarship.

1. Sudan's centre-periphery relations: discourse and reality

The clear divide between Sudan's riverine north and north-central regions (the centre) and the country's margins has been the subject of copious research elucidating the spatial inequalities at play.¹ Key dynamics include the central state concentrating investment, industrialisation, and development initiatives in the riverine regions; using the peripheries' resources and labour to sustain the centre's development and consumption; and turning the peripheries into a recruitment ground for security personnel tasked with defending these dynamics – often through violent repression.

In unpacking the hierarchies of marginalisation that exist between and within countries, including their peripheries, Johan Galtung – one of the earliest theorists of international- and country-level spatial differentiations – highlights their role in fostering 'structural violence'.² Put simply, unless these systemic problems are swiftly and comprehensively tackled, they are likely to breed physical violence. Indeed, contrary to the conventional discourse – which portrays the periphery as passive – Sudan's recent history has been marked by its peripheries successively demanding their fair share of national power and wealth. Failing that, they have taken up arms, raising the spectre of regional conflagration or separation (as in the case of South Sudan). As far back as the 1960s, elites in the centre identified the state's failed policies towards the peripheries (at the time in relation to southern Sudan) as underlying the conflict that led to the downfall of General Ibrahim Aboud's military regime in 1964.³

Sudanese and non-Sudanese experts alike have analysed the country's – and specific communities' – predicament within a centre-periphery framework. Jok Madut Jok has examined the centre's subjugation of the southern periphery through enslavement, abduction, war, and economic exploitation,⁴ while Benaiah Yongo-Bure emphasises the racial dimension of Arab elite dominance over southern Sudan.⁵ Elsewhere, Alden Young spotlights how the economic policies pursued by the state and its army of experts have exacerbated centre-periphery disparities.⁶ In particular, he shows that the "drive for increased economic growth favoured the concentration of development in a few defined areas, [which] ... did very little to address questions of regional equity. Therefore, even as economic growth resumed, political unrest continued to fester".⁷ For his part, Alex de Waal has documented the security dimension of Khartoum's relationship with the regions, with the former pursuing "counterinsurgency on the cheap" by recruiting local militias in the peripheries to fight discontented communities on behalf of the state.⁸

1 This body of scholarship includes: P. H. Holt and M. W. Daly. *History of the Sudan: From the Coming of Islam to the Present Day*. London: Longman, 2000; and Douglas H. Johnson. *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars*. Oxford: James Currey, 2007. See: Alex de Waal. *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power*. Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015.

2 Johan Galtung. "Structural theory of imperialism". *Journal of Peace Research* 8 (2). 1971.

3 Alden Young. *Transforming Sudan: Decolonization, Economic Development, and State Formation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. p.124.

4 Jok Madut Jok. *War and Slavery in Sudan*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

5 Benaiah Yongo-Bure. *Economic Development of Southern Sudan*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007.

6 Young, *Transforming Sudan*, 32.

7 Young, *Transforming Sudan*, 124.

8 Alex de Waal. "Counter-insurgency on the cheap". *Review of African Political Economy* (31) 102. 2004. See also: Julie Flint and Alex de Waal. *Darfur: A New History of a Long War*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2008, 23ff.

Nevertheless, the reality of Sudan's centre-periphery relations does not lend itself to fixed binaries. On the contrary, marginalisation can also be observed within the centre, while the periphery is also subject to internal power hierarchies. In this respect, Achille Mbembe's body of work expounds on the complex two-way relationship between power and its subjects (referred to in his later work as 'necropower' and its 'victims').⁹ Edward Thomas, meanwhile, illustrates the fluidity of centre-periphery relations using examples drawn from South Sudan, where, he argues, monetisation of local economies, together with war-induced, monetised reciprocal obligations, have turned previously autonomous hinterlands into peripheries of moneyed urban centres.¹⁰

Although Sudan's centre (riverine north and north-central) has always had its share of marginalised people living in abject poverty, the local power structures found in the country's peripheries have pushed an even higher proportion of people in these regions to the economic and political margins. Despite being geographically peripheral, Port Sudan's status as the country's primary maritime outlet means it is at the core of the Sudanese body politic. At the same time, the penury experienced by most of the city's inhabitants (both indigenous Beja and non-Beja) is an all-too-clear demonstration of their marginalisation. Moreover, in the context of Sudan's unending wars, the centre's political elite have proved adept at enticing periphery-based elites into their circuits of power, wealth, and influence¹¹, to the detriment of the peripheries' more downtrodden residents.

When it comes to Sudanese perspectives on the country's centre-periphery relations, those of Sudanese politicians and thinkers, John Garang and Mansour Khalid stand out. While the former articulated an actionable agenda for rectifying the country's inequitable situation, it was the latter who embraced and amplified it.¹² Garang's vision of a "New Sudan", built around peace, democracy, equity, and inclusive citizenship, galvanised Sudanese from diverse backgrounds – including members of the central elite – to work towards this proclaimed future.¹³ Ultimately, however, Garang's untimely death and the subsequent South Sudanese vote in favour of independence put an end to that vision. As an exasperated Mansour Kahlid observed: "Despite the change of conditions and the variation of circumstances, the state of affairs in Sudan remains the same!"¹⁴

9 See, for example: Achille Mbembe. *Necropolitics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019; and Achille Mbembe. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

10 Edward Thomas. *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation*. London: Zed Books, 2015, p.7. Over the course of the book, Thomas offers various examples that speak to the dynamic complexity of centre-periphery relations.

11 Alex De Waal (in *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015) characterises this phenomenon as a quintessential feature of the political marketplace, which is neither new nor unique to Sudan. Darfur offers many examples since 2006, while in eastern Sudan, al-Beshir succeeded in containing the challenges his regime faced by absorbing insurgent leaders such as Musa Mohammed Ahmed (of the Beja Congress) and Mabrouk Mubarak Salim (of the Rashayda Free Lions) into his government. This move broke up the movements spearheading eastern Sudanese demands for an end to marginalisation.

12 John Garang. *The Call for Democracy in Sudan*. London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1987.

13 See also Mansour Kahlid's own deeper dive into the centre-periphery divide: Mansour Kahlid. *The Government They Deserve: The Role of the Elite in Sudan's Political Evolution*. London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1990. On the rise of new thinking, see: p. 417ff.

14 Quoted in Elwathig Kameir. *My Journey with Mansour Khalid: Self-Transcendence to Embrace Diversity! John Garang and the Search for Peace and Unity!*. Rafiki Publishing and Distribution, 2022, p.32.

2. Weaponising historic neglect in the run-up to war

The historic marginalisation of Sudan's peripheries is not in dispute. The inequality seen in recent decades has its roots in the recruitment by colonial British authorities (under the rule of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium) of mostly northern Sudanese into its bureaucracy and military from the mid-1920s onwards. The 5,000-strong Sudanese colonial army was organised into the Eastern Arab Corps, Central Arab Corps, Western Arab Corps, and the Equatoria Corps. Apart from the Equatoria Corps, the units were composed "entirely of Muslim soldiers, recruited from northern and central Sudan".¹⁵ Exacerbating this bias, the entire officer corps were Sudanese from the country's riverine north and north-central.¹⁶ At the same time, Sudanese of similar background began filling the civil service ranks, forming the core of the state.¹⁷ The centre took advantage of this spatial imbalance to further its interests at every turn, creating a system that eventually became self-perpetuating.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Sudanisation process gathered pace during the run-up to independence, with those employed in the colonial military and civil service earmarked to staff the emerging nation-state's bureaucracy and security sector.¹⁸ In other words, it was mainly Sudanese from the country's north and north-central regions who would be responsible for setting the emerging state's priorities. Sudan's first ten-year economic development plan (1961/62–1970/71) saw most of the state's investment and industrialisation endeavours focused on the third of the country along the Nile River – what became the political and geographical centre.¹⁹ Not much has changed since then, as a 2005 National Congress Party (NCP) paper concerning the then-forthcoming elections outlined:

The decisive voting bloc in the coming election resides in the geographical North – at least 25 million – in the Northern states, down to Sennar/Gezira and Blue Nile areas. Voters in this area are election oriented, more educated and can be influenced. Due to their high levels of education, they also have higher demands for services and employment opportunities. We must focus on this zone. Fortunately, this zone is nearer and well connected with transport networks – tarmac roads, communication facilities, etc. It is easier and faster to manage election campaigns in this zone.²⁰

Woven into the fabric of the Sudanese state since its inception, such thinking, policy formulations, and development efforts inform the endemic marginalisation of Sudan's peripheries – which in effect constitutes the two-thirds of the country excluded from the centre.

15 Edgar O'Ballance. *Sudan, Civil War and Terrorism, 1956–99*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p.6. Although designations such as 'Arab' or 'Muslim' obscure the colonial soldiers' ethnic identities, many of the rank-and-file were from the east, including Beja from Eritrea.

16 For a recent account on the evolution and consolidation of the SAF, see: Harry Verhoeven. "Surviving revolution and democratization: The Sudan Armed Forces, state fragility and security competition". *Journal of Modern African Studies* 61 (3). 2023.

17 In this context, Johnson, *The Root Causes*, 9ff., shows the genesis and evolution of the disparity between the north and south, as well as within the south. For an account of the emergence of class differentiative, see Mansour Khalid, *The Government They Deserve*, 73ff.

18 Only the southern Sudanese staged an organised protest against a heavy northern tilt of the process, one of several factors contributing to the outbreak of the civil war in 1955, before the formal announcement of independence.

19 R. F. Wynn. "The Sudan's 10-Year Plan of Economic Development, 1961/62–1970/71: An analysis of achievement to 1967/68". *The Journal of Developing Areas* 5 (4). 1971. See also: Young, *Transforming Sudan*, 118–119.

20 Abdelrahim Hamdi. "Al-Waraqa Al-Iqtisadiyya li'l-mutammar al-watani al-hakim bi'l-Sudan". 2005. Quoted in: Harry Verhoeven. *Water, Civilization and Power in Sudan: The Political Economy of Military-Islamist State-Building*. Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 136.

Eastern Sudan – the region from the Nile River to the Red Sea, and between the Halayeb and al-Fashaga areas – is a prime example of such marginalisation. Home to diverse groups of people, some of whom straddle the borders with Egypt, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, the area features important traditional administrative structures: nazirates, independent chieftaincies (or ‘Umudiyat al-Mustaqilah’ in Arabic), and sheikhdoms. Indigenous Beja inhabitants, who have their own traditional administrative systems and rulers, can be found along the Red Sea from the Sudanese-Egyptian border to the Sudanese-Eritrean border, as well as into Sudan's interior along the Ethiopian border north of the Blue Nile.²¹ Indigenous non-Beja and various non-indigenous groups have long co-habited the region with them, including diverse Arab groups who have lived in eastern Sudan for almost a thousand years.²² More recently, Arabs (from the country's riverine central and northern regions) and non-Arabs have moved to eastern Sudan in search of livelihood opportunities,²³ or in some cases were either forcibly displaced from their homelands²⁴ or fled unbearable conditions.²⁵ Non-Sudanese from as far away as West Africa (such as the Falata), across the Red Sea (the Hadrami from Yemen), and others collectively called Suakniya (Turkish, Egyptian, Indian, Copts, Hijazi, and others) have also settled in the region, contributing to its demographic, cultural, and religious diversity.

Not all the (sectarian and non-sectarian) groups that make up the complex tapestry of peoples living in eastern Sudan have experienced the region's unequal relationship with the centre in the same way. The Beja have been afflicted by poverty, illiteracy, and diseases, with their homeland ravaged by tuberculosis to such an extent that it became known as the “TB triangle”.²⁶ Non-indigenous inhabitants, hailing from other peripheries and often living in penury, have proved similarly vulnerable to such ills.²⁷ Absent systemic interventions to combat the day-to-day challenges and reverse the historic disadvantages, the cycle of deprivation and underdevelopment took on a life of its own and became self-perpetuating.

When it comes to spatial inequality, eastern Sudan has fared at least as badly as Sudan's other peripheral regions. In 2000, when Darfuri Islamists (loyal to Hassan al-Turabi, Islamic thinker and influential leader of Sudan's Muslim Brotherhood) released “The Black Book”, demonstrating the marginalisation of their region, eastern Sudan stood out as a salient example of the case they were making. For instance, the treatise illustrated Khartoum's divide-and-rule tactics in eastern Sudan:

Turning ethnic groups against each other has been a dominant feature of this current regime. Examples here are the Hadandwa against the Beni Amer, the Amara against the Bishareen, and the Halanga against the Rashaida in the eastern region.²⁸

21 Despite its outdated language and discourse, Paul Andrew. *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*. London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1971, offers a reliable reference on the Beja people (in Sudan, Eritrea, and Egypt).

22 See, for example: Catherine Miller. “Power, land and ethnicity in the Kassala-Gedaref States”. in: Catherine Miller (ed.), *Land, Ethnicity and Political Legitimacy in Eastern Sudan*. Le Caire: CEDEJ, 2005, p.16.

23 These include Shayqiya and Ja'aleen Arabs from riverine Sudan; diverse Darfuris from western part of the country; and Rashayda (Arab) nomads from southern Arabia who crossed the Red Sea in the 19th century. See Dionisius A. Aguis, “The Rashayda: Ethnic identity and Dhow activity in Suakin on the Red Sea Coast”, *Northeast African Studies* 12 (1). 2012.

24 Having been forcibly displaced from their homelands along the Sudan–Egypt border, Nubians resettled in what they named Halfa Jadeedah in the 1960s.

25 The Sudanese falling into this category are mainly war-displaced South Kordofanis (from the Nuba Mountains) and Darfuris, while their non-Sudanese counterparts mostly consist of Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees who fled wars and their effects from the late 1960s onwards.

26 Kameir, *My Journey with Mansour*, 122ff.

27 A 2015 Sudan-wide Oxfam study found eastern Sudan ranking among the most poverty-stricken regions of the country. See: Amgad Faried Eltayeb, “Inequality in Sudan: Roots and Manifestations”, Oxfam America, 2015, 34ff.

28 Anonymous, “The Black Book: Imbalance of Power and Wealth in the Sudan”. Published informally in two parts in 2000 and 2002.

The centre-periphery imbalance has also manifested itself in a variety of negative impacts on eastern Sudan's economy and electoral politics. As has been the case across the rest of the country, semi-mechanised commercial farmers (typically from the riverine north and north-central) have accumulated wealth through the exploitation of local labour and land, coupled with tax evasion.²⁹ This has left little, if anything, for local reinvestment, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and underdevelopment suffered by the region's population. The material impoverishment of eastern Sudanese communities has gone hand-in-hand with their political disenfranchisement, brought about by electoral politicking.³⁰ Here, the political elite rationalised such marginalisation by dismissing the contribution by the peripheries to the nation-state, as the following extract from the 2005 NCP paper demonstrates:

It is to be noted that this Northern Axis [i.e. Dongola–Sinnar–Kordofan] financed the Sudan throughout its Turkish, colonial and independence eras. Even if the others have separated, this Axis can continue as a viable state. This is true in case of the separation of the South and it is equally so though in a different way in case of separation of Darfur.³¹

When the disenfranchised peoples of eastern Sudan began to reject such attitudes through organised politics and resistance, their subjection was reinforced through repression and division. Their quest for solace, material support, or even relief from across the border – coupled with Khartoum's conflicts of interest with those neighbours – added a debilitating military-cum-security dimension to eastern Sudan's marginalisation.³²

In 1958, the Beja Congress emerged as one of the earliest ethno-regional organisations in Sudan. Up until Omar al-Beshir's regime fell in 2019, the Beja Congress oscillated between being a political party and an armed insurgency, with only limited gains.³³ Its stock fell particularly low during the three decades of al-Beshir's rule. In order to contain the Beja Congress's influence and counter the threat posed by newly independent Eritrea, the government of the National Islamic Front (NIF), and later the National Congress Party (NCP), introduced what it called a "federal system" in 1994, while also restoring eastern Sudan's traditional administration (al-idarat al-ahliyah).³⁴

29 As an example – specifically, how sesame production for export perpetuates the nexus between exploitation, wealth, and poverty – see: Jean-Baptiste Galopin, et al., "Sudan's Political Market Place in 2021: Public and Political Finance, the Juba Agreement and Contest Over Resources", LSE Conflict Research Programme, May 2021.

30 In 2010, the author served as a long-term observer with The Carter Center election monitoring mission to Sudan, witnessing first-hand the hyper-securitisation of the electoral process in the peripheries. By contrast, the development investments pumped into the centre and north helped secure a clear win for the ruling NCP through the peaceful casting of ballots, even in remote communities.

31 Abdelrahim Hamdi, "Al-Waraqa Al-Iqtisadiyya li'l-mutamar al-watani al-hakim bi'l-Sudan", 2005, quoted in Verhoeven, *Water, Civilization and Power*, p.136.

32 Eastern Sudan's marginalisation cannot be seen and understood in isolation from the militarised borders with neighbouring countries: the land dispute with Egypt over the Halayeb triangle; the Eritrean independence war and attendant tensions with Ethiopia; unsettled Ethio-Sudanese borders, especially the fertile al-Fashaga region; undying friction over the use of Nile waters; and independent Eritrea's quest to contain the Islamist threat from Khartoum and Khartoum's efforts to counter that – all using eastern Sudan as an arena and eastern Sudanese as proxies,

33 See John Young, "Beja: Local Conflict, Marginalisation, and the Threat to Regional Security". Institute of Security Studies (ISS), 2007; and International Crisis Group, "Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East". Africa Report No. 209, 26 November 2013. Even in their home territory in the east, the Beja Congress could not compete with the Khatmiya/Mirghania (and their political party, the DUP), or with the Mahdiya (and their Umma party). The Beja Congress was further hampered by the fact that, unlike the two major national parties, its base and interests were narrowly focused on the three eastern states. Moreover, the banning of the Beja Congress during the three military regimes (1958–1964, 1969–1985, and 1989 onwards) denied the organisation the time, resources, and space to mature as a political actor before resorting to armed struggle against al-Beshir's regime.

34 In practice, the NIF central government retained tight control over the states, appointing and dismissing local officials at will. This lack of genuine autonomy further alienated the Beja and other marginalised groups in the east.

Khartoum's policy shift was a clear case of the centre's interests being served by the weaponisation of traditional power structures in the periphery. The NIF empowered eastern Sudan's most loyal nazirs (tribal leaders) and 'umdas (a type of community leader), pitting them against their peers, along with their foreign backers. This strategy was reinforced through propping up the armed militias of loyal traditional leaders, further diminishing the Beja Congress's influence and presence in the region. Ultimately, the regime's carrot-and-stick/divide-and-rule strategies succeeded in breaking the Beja Congress up into a multitude of weak, inconsequential factions. Moreover, all this took place within a context of fast corroding civic space and freedoms across Sudan, weakening the polity itself and further deteriorating its social fabric.³⁵

Exacerbation of centre-periphery tensions since 2019

Marginalisation of the peripheries by the still-powerful centre continued unabated until the outbreak of popular uprisings in December 2018, with the manipulation and weaponisation of pre-existing intercommunal tensions in eastern Sudan having become particularly acute by this time. The revolution led to the collapse of Omar al-Beshir's dictatorship in early 2019. Dashing initial hopes for a democratic transition, however, the fragile civilian-military power-sharing arrangement quickly became entangled in Sudan's deep-rooted centre-periphery tensions.

While Khartoum struggled with competing power centres, the peripheries descended into chaos. Local grievances were manipulated by both regional and national actors in the army and other security forces, as well as the deposed Islamists. Eastern Sudan was hard hit by a succession of violent intercommunal clashes. These dynamics contributed to the October 2021 coup and eventually the civil war that erupted in April 2023. The fact that the intercommunal violence in eastern Sudan subsided at this point suggests actors/interests close to the centre played an active role in manufacturing and/or manipulating the circumstances driving the clashes.³⁶

Rather than weakening the Islamist influence, Khartoum's missteps strengthened it, enabling Islamist factions to dominate Sudan's media landscape even before the civilian government fell.³⁷ Here, the Islamists were greatly helped by the fact that many media houses and journalists had been forced to close up shop amid escalating strife.³⁸ The resultant information war was pivotal in worsening eastern Sudan's instability.

As the transitional government struggled to consolidate power, intercommunal tensions in the east escalated, fuelled by hate speech and political manipulation.³⁹ Seemingly minor incidents degenerated into wider conflicts involving throngs of supporters on either side. Such incidents were often accompanied by the whipping up of hostile sentiment by local media, while security personnel would stand idly by as heated situations escalated. Although the immediate causes of these violent clashes varied in each case, they all drew on a long history of rivalry and conflict (e.g. Hadendawa vs. Beni Amer; Nuba vs. the Beni Amer), as well as a divisive identity politics that had lately been normalised.

35 Young, "Beja: Local Conflict"; and International Crisis Group, "Sudan: Preserving Peace".

36 Dan Watson. "Danse macabre: Revolution and counter-revolution in post-oil Sudan". ACLED, 12 October 2020; and Dan Watson. "Appetite for destruction: The military counter-revolution in Sudan". ACLED, 29 October 2021.

37 One such misstep involved the post-Beshir government's efforts to cleanse the system of erstwhile Islamists and their influence through the Committee to Dismantle and Remove the Empowerment of the Deposed Regime ("لإزالة كي كفتة نجل" "لوزعم ال سيئ ال ماطن ني كمت", or Lejnat al-Tamkin in short).

38 Al-Sharq Al-Awsat. "War leaves 90% of Sudanese journalists unemployed". 15 December 2023.

39 Watson, "Appetite for Destruction".

Against this turbulent backdrop, both incipient and past sources of conflict became drivers of communal tensions. In terms of the latter, the Eastern Track of the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement (JPA), between Sudan's transitional government and rebel groups, pitted former NCP allies against each other. Whereas Alamin Dawud, the former leader of the United People's Front for Liberation and Justice (UPFLJ) – a coalition of eastern Sudanese forces – took active part in national-level negotiations, Nizir Sayed Tirik of the Hadendawa (a pastoralist sub-group of the Beja tribe) instead struck an alliance with other traditional leaders in the east – including Dirar Ahmed Dirar (aka Shaiba Dirar) of the Beja Congress – in opposing the JPA and Dawud's participation in it.⁴⁰ Tirik and his newly formed High Council of Beja Nazirs and Independent Chieftains organised a blockade of Port Sudan, effectively cutting off Sudan's main trade route. As a consequence, the capital was starved of vital resources, paralysing the economy. Rather than confront Tirik head-on, SAF leader and Chairman of the governing Transitional Sovereignty Council General Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan sought to accommodate him, while the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) leveraged the turmoil to expand its foothold in the region.⁴¹

In summer 2019, Khartoum declared a state of emergency in Red Sea state, deploying the RSF to restore order. However, the intervention only deepened suspicions. Violence and hate speech continued unabated: nine people lost their lives in Port Sudan in January 2020; eight were killed in Kassala in May; and a further 30 died in Port Sudan in July, with many more injured.⁴² These intercommunal tensions and clashes coupled with pervasive underdevelopment and active manipulation by the powerful entrenched distrust among eastern Sudanese and further diminished their agency.

Having operated in eastern Sudan since at least 2018,⁴³ the RSF used its presence to secure lucrative gold mines and export arrangements. Seeking a stronger foothold in his latent rivalry with the army, the RSF's commander, Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, commonly known as "Hemedti", positioned himself as a protector of marginalised groups. When some Beni Amer reportedly pledged loyalty to the RSF, tacitly accusing the army of siding with the Nuba due to the group's disproportionate representation within it,⁴⁴ the army exploited these same tribal divisions to curtail the RSF's eastern ascendancy.⁴⁵ More directly, the SAF blocked Hemedti's attempts to establish permanent military bases along the Red Sea coast. This would remain a bone of contention between the SAF and RSF, fuelling the subsequent civil war. When

40 Ahmed Fadl. "أي لب قلا عارض لاي كذي نم... نادوس تروب يف فن ع لاداجا" ("Violent incidents in Port Sudan. Who fuels tribal conflict?"). *Al-Jazeera*, 20 November 2019.

41 Mohammed Amin. "The Sudanese armed leader gaining power in the vital Red Sea region". *Middle East Eye*, 2 February 2023. Local sources in Port Sudan claimed that RSF commander Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo "Hemedti" supported these nazirs. It remains unclear, however, whether this claim emanates from Hemedti hosting the nazirs during their travels to Khartoum in his capacity as Sovereignty Council second-in-command, or from other machinations, of which there were many, on the ground in the east. Regardless, it is widely believed locally that the state was arming and supplying eastern Sudanese factions throughout the transition period.

42 Al Jazeera. "Dozens killed in tribal clashes in eastern Sudan". 12 August 2020.

43 *Sudan Tribune*. "Sudan deploys thousands of militiamen on border with Eritrea". 5 January 2018.

44 Although there is no evidence of the purported pledge of loyalty to, or eliciting of protection from, the RSF, *Sudan in the News* posted a video recording on its Twitter (now X) account on 30 August 2019 of a Beni Amer traditional leader calling on Beja youth to enlist in the security forces, including the RSF, as they needed a presence/representation in these institutions. Meanwhile, the *Middle East Eye* reported that Hemedti undertook an aggressive recruitment drive of Beni Amer on the heels of former NCP members from the Beni Amer inciting their kin to join the RSF on the basis of the military having armed the Nuba. See: Mohammed Amin. "Sudanese fear growing violence in east of country caused by security vacuum". *Middle East Eye*. 13 June 2019.

45 See: Amar Jamal. "Port Sudan: The Political Economy of a Potential Administrative Capital". *Small Arms Survey*, April 2024.

Khartoum sought to revive the JPA's Eastern Track in February 2023,⁴⁶ it sparked renewed tensions,⁴⁷ culminating in its indefinite suspension.⁴⁸ Less than two months later, Sudan descended into full-scale civil war. Now, eastern Sudan has found itself caught in the middle of a national power struggle, with no meaningful resolution to its own longstanding grievances in sight.

46 Radio Dabanga. "Eastern Sudanese sign new JPA Implementation Matrix, Beja Nazirs Council rejects it". 21 February 2023. For aspects of the agreement's offering to Eastern Sudan, see Paragraph 75 of the JPA's Eastern Track, October 2020.

47 Radio Dabanga. "Eastern Sudan nazirs blame peace track for violent clashes". 4 October 2020.

48 Radio Dabanga. "Eastern Sudan peace protocol suspended". 17 December 2021.

3. Housing the centre without becoming one

Unlike Sudan's past wars, the conflagration that started in April 2023 began in the country's literal and figurative centre. The alliance between generals al-Burhan and RSF leader Hemedti, created to undermine the government of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, proved short lived. Hemedti's guile, combined with the SAF's underestimation of him, allowed the RSF commander to strategically position his forces in and around Khartoum during the transition. Thus, when the war erupted, the RSF was quickly able to seize control of large parts of the capital. In response, SAF fighter jets bombed RSF-held locations, including Khartoum's civilian airport.

Unsafe in the capital, several government ministries – as well as a number of foreign and domestic organisations and agencies – decided to relocate to Port Sudan, attracted by its functioning airport, maritime port, and remoteness from the zone of active fighting. Although al-Burhan was pinned down in Khartoum during the first few months of the conflict, the SAF established its makeshift headquarters in Port Sudan. The arrival of these sovereign organs meant Port Sudan soon became – in addition to a commercial hub and the country's only port city – the seat of government.⁴⁹ This momentous move offers the possibility of altering the long-established relationship between the country's centre and its variegated peripheries. Thus far, however, the actions and policy priorities of the SAF-cum-Transitional Sovereignty Council-cum-government, together with the initial responses of those claiming to represent indigenous communities, threaten to perpetuate the vicious cycle Sudan has been stuck in for decades.

Since relocating to Port Sudan, the SAF and Transitional Sovereignty Council have reproduced the authoritarian habits of the centre, remaining unresponsive to local needs. In July 2023, the post-Khartoum cabinet held its first meeting under Minister of Cabinet Affairs Osman Hussein and Lieutenant General Ibrahim Jaber, Transitional Sovereignty Council member and assistant to al-Burhan.⁵⁰ After arriving in Port Sudan in mid-2023, al-Burhan began receiving foreign dignitaries and making trips to foreign capitals, formalising the transfer of Sudan's seat of government.⁵¹ Al-Burhan worked to restructure Sudan's governance at both central and state levels, signalling preparation for a drawn-out war. Few concessions were made to local interests. In November 2023, as part of "streamlining governance and addressing pressing issues", al-Burhan replaced the governor of Kassala state in eastern Sudan with a figure more closely aligned with the SAF. A few months later, he replaced the governor of Gederef with a senior military officer.⁵² In mid-April 2024, senior military officers replaced the governors of Kassala and Gederef states.⁵³

While it is fair to say the SAF did not have time to consult residents about its move to Port Sudan beforehand, it has nevertheless failed to grasp the opportunity presented since then to embed the

49 The last time Sudan's Red Sea region served as such a centre was during the Sudanese Mahdiah uprising and state (1881–1898). In 1884, the British took control over the historic port of Suakin (and its environs, which includes present day Port Sudan), using it to launch their reconquest of the rest of the country, including Omdurman.

50 Jamal, "Port Sudan".

51 *Sudan Tribune*. "Sudanese military leader arrives in Port Sudan, ahead of regional tour". 24 August 2023. SAF deputy commander, General Yassir al-Atta, similarly broke out of a separate siege he had been under until November 2023 and reported for duty in Port Sudan.

52 *Sudan Tribune*. "Burhan reshuffles Sudanese Cabinet, dismissed several governors". 22 November 2023.

53 *Sudan Tribune*. "Sudan relieves Foreign Minister and two governors". 17 April 2024.

relocated government branches within local communities and so begin rebalancing the established relationship. Hamstrung by the structural handicap entrenched during the previous decades and by the fresh waves of intercommunal clashes, the eastern Sudanese have, for their part, proved incapable of collectively asserting their claim to power and resources. The local reception to the relocation was ambivalent. Notable Beja figures in eastern Sudan initially opposed the move for a number of reasons, namely: 1) the risk of the conflict expanding into their region (a clear indication that those holding this view believed the conflict had nothing to do with them, and that the warring sides should deal with the matter on their own turf); 2) fear of former Islamists returning to power; 3) past unfavourable experiences dealing with, or at the hands of, the SAF; and 4) possible sympathy towards the RSF, although this has not materialised on the ground two years into the conflict.

Shaiba Dirar – arguably one of the most powerful Beja (of the Amara) leaders – was the first to resist the SAF and central state's relocation to his hometown, despite also having been among the first to welcome them and pledge his support against the RSF. In a flagrant rejection of government authority, Dirar's forces set up checkpoints in September 2023 reportedly “to prevent smuggling goods out of the state while Port Sudan residents lacked essential commodities”.⁵⁴ The next day, Dirar declared, “We were inspecting lorries with relief goods to stop the looting by the RSF when army forces attacked our checkpoint. We defended ourselves”.⁵⁵ In contrast to the nonchalance shown towards such measures over the preceding four years, SAF units forcefully dismantled the checkpoint and chased off Dirar's forces. Dirar's previous and subsequent record raises the question of whether his post-April 2023 actions are actually a means of promoting Beja interests or merely an attempt to extract concessions (for himself and his narrow group) from the state in much the same way as rent-seeking insurgency leaders of the past. Either way, the state's response was consistent with its established methods of dealing with wayward peripheries: offer transient, narrowly focused – even personal – concessions, preceded or immediately followed by harsh security measures.

Secretary General of the Beja Congress, Osama Said, linked local objections to SAF's relocation to Port Sudan to the desire to prevent the spread of the conflict to the east and avoid the resurgence of former regime elements. The incident involving Shaiba Dirar's forces illustrates how the relatively peaceful region might be sucked into the civil war, especially given the free rein handed to former regime officials in Port Sudan. According to Said, their mobilisation efforts against the RSF were an open invitation for the war to come to eastern Sudan:

Establishing any non-consensual authority and forming a government of remnants and corrupt individuals in Port Sudan is an imminent danger to the region and its people, and will detract from its resources, which are being depleted daily in service of the current war. Forming a government from other regions is something the people of eastern Sudan will work to confront and repel in order to preserve their resources.⁵⁶

Even though everything Said cautioned against has since come to pass, none of the accompanying threats “to confront and repel” have materialised.

Over time, with the imperative of winning the war overriding any other concerns for the SAF and the Transitional Sovereignty Council, the interests of local communities have been further deprioritised. The socioeconomic and logistical pressures affecting Port Sudan have intensified greatly since the first wave of displaced citizens and institutions arrived in the city, adversely affecting the Beja in general and Amara

54 *Sudan Tribune*. “Clashes erupt in Port Sudan as Sudanese army dismantles militia checkpoint”. 18 September 2023.

55 Radio Dabanga. “Sudan army exchanges gunfire with Red Sea state forces”. 19 September 2023.

56 *Al-Arab*. “نادوسال قرش يف ايسايسواي ريكس ع اق زام هجاوي نادرال” (“Burhan faces military and political impasse in eastern Sudan”), 20 September 2023.

natives in particular, as well as the city's non-Beja residents. On top of the war-induced erosion of citizens' purchasing power, prices of consumer goods have undergone multi-fold increases, housing shortages have worsened, and services have deteriorated at an even faster rate than previously.

Although the initial pressure eased due to the onward travel/migration of expatriates and Sudanese alike, it soon returned as a result of developments on the war front. In December 2023, the RSF captured Wad Madani, capital of Gezira state, and placing it in a position to threaten Gederef state. This prompted a renewed wave of displaced citizens, many of whom resettled in Port Sudan. The city is now home to many more people than it was designed for, and certainly more than its infrastructure can sustain.

The exodus of Khartoum's civil servants to Port Sudan and gradual re-establishment of the central state bureaucracy in the city has led to the Red Sea state administration – including its officials and concerns – being pushed aside. The central government has superceded local administration. To make matters worse, co-location of national and Red Sea state authorities in the same building has resulted in instructions for state-level officials to stay home, essentially placing local administrators on paid leave.⁵⁷

Seeking relief from the intensifying pressures, Beja groups – starting with the Amarar – approached al-Burhan's administration and al-Burhan himself in early 2024. There are conflicting accounts about what transpired. Whereas one source claims that al-Burhan demanded to see the various Beja groups separately, another reports that he advised them to come to him as a unified grouping with clear, actionable demands. The unfolding of events is characteristic of a situation in which the central state arrogates powers while only sporadically and inconsistently consulting local communities/leaders.

The SAF's general mobilisation against the RSF in mid-2023 was met with a mixed reception in eastern Sudan. SAF attempts to recruit volunteers (known as mustanfereen, literally “mobilised”), including offers of weapons and training. As elsewhere, the mobilisation was assisted by members of al-Beshir's deposed Islamist government and party. This enabled the resurgence of Islamist militia aligned with the former government and paved the way for suspension of a post-2019 ban on former regime activity. Emboldened, former NCP leaders and operatives convened the party's shura council in November 2024, despite al-Burhan warning against it.⁵⁸

The return of these former rulers, particularly the hardcore Islamists, deepened eastern Sudanese political actors' distrust of the state. It also provoked deep concern among Sudan's regional neighbours. This regional consternation, along with past experiences of the deposed Islamist government's divide-and-rule approach to eastern Sudan, partly explain the lukewarm response of Sudan's neighbours to the SAF's general mobilisation. Nevertheless, following al-Burhan's visit to Asmara in September 2023, Eritrea offered its support.⁵⁹ Al-Burhan then called on eastern political and traditional leaders – mostly known to Asmara from their pre-2019 Beja movements – to mobilise their respective communities to take up arms in self-defence.

More than a dozen armed groups with military training and experience (re-)emerged across eastern Sudan and western Eritrea. These included eastern Sudanese groups under various leadership, some with strong ties to Eritrea and other regional actors, such as the UAE. Young men recruited to serve were sent to Eritrean-operated training camps along the common border. Ultimately, however, only recruits

57 Confidential consultations.

58 *Sudan Akhbar*. “سودان: مصادر تكشف تفاصيل اجتماع لوجستي في العاصمة السودانية الخرطوم” (“Sources reveal new details about the secret meeting attended by Beshir. A major split shakes the National Congress”). 17 November 2024.

59 Associated Press. “Sudan's military chief visits Eritrea to discuss Sudan conflict with the president”. 11 September 2023.

mobilised by the UPFLJ's Alamin Dawud joined the SAF. Others defected to RSF support or have avoided allying formally with either side in the conflict. In this respect, the SAF's chequered history in the east seems to have deterred significant numbers of able-bodied men from heeding its general mobilisation call.⁶⁰

Eastern Sudanese concerns continued to intensify in light of the unrelenting securitisation imposed on the region, which came on top of ongoing economic pressures and military mobilisation. In the words of one researcher, "Securitisation remains the most viable governance strategy in Port Sudan in the face of possible infiltration by the RSF and their alliances".⁶¹

In early 2024, a national television station supervisor in Port Sudan barred a Hadendawa female journalist from wearing her traditional outfit and threatened her with the loss of her job.⁶² Four months later, in June 2024, a Beja group raided the television station, demanding its director be fired. This incident reflects the centre reproducing its habits of repression despite its physical relocation to the east; the fact that the community's response came four months after the fact points to the role played by rent-seeking provocateurs seeking to take advantage of fraught situations.⁶³ More generally, the sometimes brutal discrimination displayed towards eastern Sudanese communities by state security personnel/agencies illustrates the persistence of harmful centre-periphery dynamics, namely the fomenting of tensions and conflict, as well as the imposition of repressive power against those regarded as unruly.

Following the RSF's capture of Wad Madani, the capital of Gezira state, SAF security units arrested some Beja men (especially the Beni Amer), who had fled Wad Madani in the wake of its fall to the RSF and sought refuge in eastern Sudan, on charges of either collaborating with or working for the RSF. The veracity of these accusations cannot be confirmed. In late August 2024, state security forces reportedly took a Beni Amer businessman in Kassala into custody on suspicion of collaborating with RSF. He was then tortured and killed, inflaming tensions and prompting civil society groups and political organisations to demand accountability.⁶⁴ Protests following the death were dispersed by the security forces.⁶⁵ These actions demonstrate the state security apparatus' belief that it does not need to change its *modus operandi* regarding relations with eastern Sudanese communities.

Having begun to make headway on the battlefield since late 2024, the SAF renewed its efforts to canvas support. This was done both with the aim of reaffirming its legitimacy and – possibly – easing tensions within its own ranks. In January 2025, al-Burhan decreed a number of changes to the 2019 transitional charter, including expanding the Transitional Sovereignty Council from five to nine members, three of whom were JPA signatories. He also bestowed various additional powers on himself as the Transitional Sovereignty Council Chairman, from the authority to appoint the other six members of the council to installing or dismissing the prime minister.⁶⁶ In May 2025, technocrat Kamil Idris was appointed prime

60 Sayed Ali Abu Amna, who once belonged to Tirik's High Council, alleged in October 2024 that a new militia formation called Eastern Orta Forces has joined the SAF. Abu Amna claimed the militia was composed of Eritreans and vowed to fight it, although it is unclear whether this is indicative of loyalty to the RSF or a rejection of what he believes to be foreign intervention. See: Assayha, "Eritrean forces enter Sudan under the guise of Eastern Orta amidst widespread criticism from Beja leaders", 31 October 2024.

61 Jamal, "Port Sudan".

62 That incident cannot be seen in isolation from the layered challenges that female journalists continued to face across the country. See: *Sudan Tribune*, "Sudanese female journalists face threats, harassment", 7 May 2024.

63 Radio Tamazuj, "Beja tribesmen storm Sudan TV over presenter's traditional attire". 21 June 2024.

64 Radio Dabanga, "ACJPS reports torture death of eastern Sudanese businessman". 6 September 2024.

65 Radio Tamazuj, "Sudan: Security agents disperse youth protest in Kassala". 3 September 2024.

66 *Sudan Tribune*, "Sudan's Burhan set for expanded powers under proposed constitutional changes". 9 January 2025.

minister. While the composition of his government was at the time of writing still to be determined,⁶⁷ thus far eastern Sudanese political forces seem to have been largely excluded.

Despite being the current seat of government, Port Sudan has not been declared Sudan's capital. Sudan's traditional centre and elite seem to regard Port Sudan's status as the administrative centre as fleeting. As a commentator on Sudan has noted, officially "naming Port Sudan as the capital poses risks for al-Burhan since [Hemedti]... could feel compelled to name an RSF-controlled capital elsewhere".⁶⁸ Whatever form the post-war polity takes, Khartoum likely will remain the country's formal capital. Shortly after assuming office, Prime Minister Idris declared that military and government functions would gradually return to Khartoum, and higher education institutions in the capital would re-open. Renewed attention on re-establishing authority from Khartoum suggests that Sudan's riverine northern and north-central elites will continue to dominate – and continue to treat the current conflict as a brief, inconvenient disruption of long-standing patterns of centre-periphery relations.

67 Al Jazeera. "Sudan's army leader al-Burhan appoints former UN official as prime minister". 19 May 2025. On the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)'s disapproval of the new prime minister, see: *North Africa Post*. "Sudan's fragile peace under strain as JEM condemns cabinet dissolution". 4 June 2025.

68 Jamal, "Port Sudan".

Conclusion

The unfolding chaos across Sudan highlights how Khartoum's ruling elites have persistently failed – in both discourse and practice – to address the concerns of the country's peripheries. Whether under al-Beshir's regime, the transitional government, or the current warring factions, eastern Sudan has been treated as little more than a (resource-endowed) arena for national power struggles, with local actors weaponised by political forces at the centre. Rather than strengthening local governance, civilian leaders in control after al-Beshir's fall alienated key eastern Sudanese groups, failed to neutralise resurgent Islamist influences, and mismanaged ethnic tensions. Meanwhile, the military (the SAF and RSF) oscillated between neglect, manipulation, and heavy-handed repression, utilising eastern grievances to further their respective strategic objectives. In the run up to the civil war, tensions between the RSF and SAF further complicated eastern Sudan's political and security landscapes. Both sides sought to take control of the region's economic resources, as well as the Red Sea corridor.

The centre's enduring practice of neglecting the peripheries, combined with its ongoing machinations in eastern Sudan (presented as necessary for winning the war), has served to reproduce the old centre in a new geography. Failure to redress the centre-periphery imbalance risks re-emergence of de-stabilising dynamics after the war's conclusion. Over two years into the war, eastern Sudan remains strategically crucial but dangerously volatile; crucial because of its continued local and regional geostrategic significance, and volatile because none of its internal conflicts have been addressed. Without a comprehensive, locally driven peace process, the region – caught between national and global rivalries, and beset by unresolved grievances – is likely to remain a flashpoint both in terms of the current conflict and possible future crises.

Against this backdrop, the country's rulers would do well to recognise that reproducing the worn-out thoughts and practices of previous decades – rooted as they are in unfairness, inequality, and injustice – does not offer a viable means of wrenching the country from its post-independence rut. The war effort does not have to trump all other concerns. Rather, addressing historic grievances and answering the call for systemic change would not only strengthen the governing body's hand, but potentially usher in a new era of inclusion for all Sudanese.

The old approach of placating elites from the periphery by bringing them closer to power while violently repressing their base is unlikely to work in a future Sudan. Although the politicisation of the Sudanese public and pervasive armament of the grassroots does not guarantee that the east – or, indeed, Sudan's other peripheries – will get its fair share of power and wealth, it does preclude a return to business as usual in Khartoum. Efforts to return the government (in part or whole) to Sudan's official capital appear premature. Khartoum's infrastructure has been decimated by the war; private and public property has been looted; RSF drone attacks continue to pose security challenges; and the prospect of the RSF retaking some or all parts of the city cannot be ruled out. Returned government ministries and institutions are unlikely to find a viable working environment in Khartoum, while foreign embassies and agencies (including international NGOs) are unlikely to return. Thus, for all practical purposes, Port Sudan is set to remain the seat of government for the foreseeable future.

In light of this, civilian and military actors should start recasting eastern Sudan (and other marginalised regions) as a vital pillar for a more inclusive Sudan. Any political settlement should be premised on a multi-centred, democratic state where all regions have an equal stake and say in shaping Sudan's future. That process should start with formally institutionalising Port Sudan as co-capital or administrative centre along with Khartoum. Sudanese actors should also actively consider the terms and conditions under which further centres could emerge and be formalised. Recognising that inequality exists

within peripheries as well as between centre and periphery, any decentralisation initiative must guard against the reproduction of marginalisation in eastern Sudan (or elsewhere). Thus, rather than merely empowering dominant ethnic or regional elites, intra-periphery inclusion should be promoted in order to prevent elite capture.

If accompanied by a meaningful redistribution of resources and power, such structural decentralisation could herald a new era of geographic equity in Sudan, with a variety of regional power-sharing arrangements possible. These range from devolved provincial or district governance to a robust federation or confederation. Although any such arrangement would require a great deal of good will, resources, and expertise – attributes currently in short supply – putting enforceable legal guarantees in place, as well as monitoring by independent national and international institutions, would at least offer a credible basis for enduring solutions.

Should Sudan fail to embark on fundamental restructuring, potentially involving multiple centres, it risks further division. South Sudan has split from Sudan, but the rest of the country still has the opportunity to rally round John Garang's vision of equality, democracy, and inclusion. Only by doing so will it be possible to break the vicious cycle of the centre exploiting impoverished peripheries, which then feel compelled to pursue their rights through violence.

Bibliography

The list below does not include the two dozen confidential consultations (structured and unstructured) and focus group discussions that the author held in Cairo, Addis Ababa, Nairobi, and remotely.

Dionisius A Aguis. "The Rashayda: Ethnic identity and Dhow activity in Suakin on the Red Sea Coast". *Northeast African Studies* 12/1 (2012): 169–216.

Al-Arab. "نادوسلا قرش يف ايسايسواي ركسع اقزأم هجاوي ناهربلا" ("Burhan faces military and political impasse in eastern Sudan"). 20 September 2023.

Al Jazeera. "Sudan's army leader al-Burhan appoints former UN official as prime minister". 19 May 2025.

Al Jazeera. "Dozens killed in tribal clashes in eastern Sudan". 12 August 2020.

Al-Sharq Al-Awsat. "ريشبللا م كح قيفصت تارارق يف رظنلل قدي دج قنجل لكشي نادوسلاءاضقلا" ("Sudan's judiciary forms new committee to consider decisions to liquidate al-Beshir's rule"). 17 October 2024.

Al-Sharq Al-Awsat. "War leaves 90% of Sudanese journalists unemployed". 15 December 2023.

Mohammed Amin. "The Sudanese armed leader gaining power in the vital Red Sea region". *Middle East Eye*, 2 February 2023.

Mohammed Amin. "Sudanese fear growing violence in east of country caused by security vacuum". *Middle East Eye*, 13 June 2019.

Paul Andrew. *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*. London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1971.

Anonymous. "The Black Book: Imbalance of Power and Wealth in the Sudan".

Assayha. "Eritrean forces enter Sudan under the guise of Eastern Orta amidst widespread criticism from Beja leaders". 31 October 2024.

Associated Press. "Sudan's military chief visits Eritrea to discuss Sudan conflict with the president". 11 September 2023.

Ayin Network. "The Al-Bara Ibn Malik Brigade: A lifeline to the army or a lifelong challenge". 14 June 2024.

Amgad Faried Eltayeb. "Inequality in Sudan: Roots and Manifestations". Oxfam America, 2015.

Ahmed Fadl. "يبلبللا عارضلا اي كذي نم نادوستروب يف فنعل ائادحأ" ("Violent incidents in Port Sudan. Who fuels tribal conflict?"). 20 November 2019.

Julie Flint and Alex de Waal. *Darfur: A New History of a Long War*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2008.

Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, Eddie Thomas, Sarah Detzner, and Alex de Waal. “[Sudan’s Political Market Place in 2021: Public and Political Finance, the Juba Agreement and Contest Over Resources](#)”. LSE Conflict Research Programme, May 2021.

Johan Galtung. “Structural theory of imperialism”. *Journal of Peace Research* 8/2 (1971): 81–117.

John Garang. *The Call for Democracy in Sudan*. London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1987.

P. H. Holt and M. W. Daly. *History of the Sudan: From the Coming of Islam to the Present Day*. London: Longman, 2000.

International Crisis Group. “[Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East](#)”. Africa Report No. 209. 26 November 2013.

Amar Jamal. “[Port Sudan: The Political Economy of a Potential Administrative Capital](#)”. Small Arms Survey, April 2024.

Douglas H. Johnson. *The Root Causes of Sudan’s Civil Wars*. Oxford: James Currey, 2007.

Jok Madut Jok. *War and Slavery in Sudan*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Mansour Khalid. *The Government They Deserve: The Role of the Elite in Sudan’s Political Evolution*. London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1990.

Elwathig Kameir. *My Journey with Mansour Khalid: Self-Transcendence to Embrace Diversity! John Garang and the Search for Peace and Unity!*. Rafiki Publishing and Distribution, 2022.

Achille Mbembe. *Necropolitics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019.

Achille Mbembe. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

Catherine Miller. “Power, land and ethnicity in the Kassala-Gedaref States”. In: Catherine Miller (ed.), *Land, Ethnicity and Political Legitimacy in Eastern Sudan*. Le Caire: CEDEJ, 2005.

North Africa Post. “[Sudan’s fragile peace under strain as JEM condemns cabinet dissolution](#)”. 4 June 2025.

Edgar O’Ballance. *Sudan, Civil War and Terrorism, 1956–99*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

Radio Dabanga. “[El Burhan: ‘NCP and Tagadom will not return to power in Sudan’](#)”. 9 February 2025.

Radio Dabanga. “[ACJPS reports torture death of eastern Sudanese businessman](#)”. 6 September 2024.

Radio Dabanga. “[Sudan army exchanges gunfire with Red Sea state forces](#)”. 19 September 2023.

Radio Dabanga. “[Eastern Sudanese sign new JPA Implementation Matrix, Beja Nazirs Council rejects it](#)”. 21 February 2023.

Radio Dabanga. “[Eastern Sudan peace protocol suspended](#)”. 17 December 2021.

Radio Dabanga. “Eastern Sudan nazirs blame peace track for violent clashes”. 4 October 2020.

Radio Tamazuj. “Sudan: Security agents disperse youth protest in Kassala”. 3 September 2024.

Radio Tamazuj. “Beja tribesmen storm Sudan TV over presenter’s traditional attire”. 21 June 2024.

Sudan Akhbar. “ينطول رمتؤم الزهي ريبك قاقشننا..ريشبالا دوجوب يرسلا عامتجالا لوح ةديدل لي صافت فشكت رداصم” (“Sources reveal new details about the secret meeting attended by Beshir. A major split shakes the National Congress”). 17 November 2024.

Sudan News Agency (SUNA). “PM Orders all Universities to Reopen in Capital Khartoum”. University World News, 20 June 2025.

Sudan News Agency (SUNA). “Prime Minister decides gradual relocation to national capital as a strategic step towards strengthening governance and balanced development”. n.d.

Sudan Tribune. “Sudan’s Burhan set for expanded powers under proposed constitutional changes”. 9 January 2025.

Sudan Tribune. “Sudanese female journalists face threats, harassment”. 7 May 2024.

Sudan Tribune. “Sudan relieves Foreign Minister and two governors”. 17 April 2024.

Sudan Tribune. “Burhan reshuffles Sudanese Cabinet, dismissed several governors”. 22 November 2023.

Sudan Tribune. “Clashes erupt in Port Sudan as Sudanese army dismantles militia checkpoint”. 18 September 2023.

Sudan Tribune. “Sudanese military leader arrives in Port Sudan, ahead of regional tour”. 24 August 2023.

Sudan Tribune. “Sudan deploys thousands of militiamen on border with Eritrea”. 5 January 2018.

Khalid Mohammed Taha. “نادوسل قرش يف ةمداقل لبرجلار دُن: جالسلاراشت نا” (“Weapons Proliferation in Eastern Sudan: Harbinger of a Coming War”). June 2024.

Edward Thomas. *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation*. London: Zed Books, 2015.

Harry Verhoeven. “Surviving revolution and democratization: The Sudan Armed Forces, state fragility and security competition”. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 61/3 (2023): 413–437.

Harry Verhoeven. *Water, Civilization and Power in Sudan: The Political Economy of Military-Islamist State-Building*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Alex de Waal. “Counter-insurgency on the cheap”. *Review of African Political Economy* 31/102 (2004): 716–725.

Alex de Waal. *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power*. Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015.

Dan Watson. “Appetite for destruction: The military counter-revolution in Sudan”. ACLED, 29 October 2021.

Dan Watson. “Danse macabre: Revolution and counter-revolution in post-oil Sudan”. ACLED, 12 October 2020.

R. F. Wynn. “The Sudan’s 10-Year Plan of Economic Development, 1961/62–1970/71: An analysis of achievement to 1967/68”. *The Journal of Developing Areas* 5/4 (1971): 555–576.

Benaiah Yongo-Bure. *Economic Development of Southern Sudan*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007.

Alden Young. *Transforming Sudan: Decolonization, Economic Development, and State Formation*. Cambridge University, 2018.

John Young. “Beja: Local Conflict, Marginalisation, and the Threat to Regional Security”. Institute of Security Studies (ISS), 2007.



XCEPT

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS