

Sudan's war in El Fasher: civilians as the battlefield of armed politics



Photo courtesy of [Darfur Follow-ups](#), used with permission.

Introduction

As the tragedy in El Fasher unfolded, videos and photos of at-scale violations spread rapidly and provoked global shock. Sudan's war returned to the headlines after what could be considered over more than two years of global neglect. The atrocities committed by RSF in El Fasher were not a spur-of-the-moment event. They were a result of a war fought against civilians as a strategy for gaining legitimacy.

The shift back to Darfur

Darfur was initially not the main battleground in the fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which had erupted in mid-April 2023. Initially, clashes were largely confined to and around military garrisons, and the Darfur region remained relatively peripheral to the first wave of combat. That calm, however, did not last.

Six months into the war and with no solution in sight, fighting returned to Darfur: RSF shifted its focus towards securing supply lines and protecting its rear along Sudan's western borders. After months of neutrality, former Darfur rebel movements that regrouped into Joint Forces aligned with the army, pledging to defend El Fasher as the last stronghold. On the surface, this pattern might seem a familiar battle tactic, i.e. armed groups fighting for territory in a grinding war of attrition. But beneath the battlefield, a deeper contest emerged: both sides began using violence against civilians as a way to manufacture legitimacy and to present themselves as the rightful authority.

The struggle for legitimacy

This was never simply a war between the state and its enemies. It is a war between two forces produced by Sudan's long-standing armed politics: an army that has governed through proxies, and a militia that outgrew its role. For decades, the SAF relied on local armed actors—often mobilised through clan and community networks—to fight internal wars, while keeping them politically subordinate. The RSF was the exception: built as a regime instrument, it quickly accumulated autonomy, its own resources, and regional ties.

That history matters. The RSF helped topple Omar al-Bashir in 2019—the very regime it had been created to protect. In 2021, it joined the SAF in overthrowing the civilian-led transition, but with diverging agendas. The result is today's war: not only a battle for territory, but a contest over who can claim the authority of the state.

This struggle for legitimacy became most visible in El Fasher. As the last major city in Darfur outside RSF control, it was not only a military objective but a political symbol—one that both sides needed in order to claim authority over the region. Yet it was civilians who would be made to carry the burden of that symbolism.

The militarisation of displacement

For the SAF, holding El Fasher meant preserving a claim to Darfur—and to a region the size of France. For the RSF, capturing it would consolidate territorial control, secure supply lines, and tighten its grip over Sudan's western border. The stakes were therefore not only local. Regional and international actors watched closely, anxious about who would control frontier routes and the economic corridors linked to livestock, agriculture, and cross-border trade.

Under this pressure, the SAF's defense strategy took a deadly turn: it began militarising displacement sites around the city. In Zamzam camp - the largest in the area, home to roughly half a million people - SAF and allied forces established defensive positions, stationed armed units inside and around the camp, and restricted civilians' movement. Zamzam was thus transformed into both a buffer and a target.

Zamzam was not only militarised but also politically instrumentalised in a particularly cynical manner. The camp's residents - largely non-Arab communities - carried deep memories of earlier violence. Many were survivors, or children of survivors, of the 2003–2005 mass killings in Darfur, carried out by the state and its allied militias, including the very forces that later became the RSF.

These grievances did not fade with time; rather, they were strategically repurposed. SAF and allied forces used these memories to fuel a narrative of resistance that increasingly took on ethnic and nationalist tones. RSF was depicted as foreign intruders—diaspora Arab elements from neighboring countries seeking to seize land. Young men, in particular, became prime targets for mobilisation and recruitment, as historical trauma was transformed into a resource for contemporary war-making.

This transformation of a displacement camp into a battlefield did not go unnoticed. [Former U.S. envoy Tom Perriello](#) warned that civilians must not be used as weapons or shields. He condemned SAF militarization of the camp and asserted that RSF shelling is equally inexcusable—both clear violations of international humanitarian law. Sudanese [human rights organizations](#) echoed these concerns, denouncing the military presence in Zamzam for exposing civilians to grave danger.

Yet these warnings produced no protective action from either side. Instead, they triggered a propaganda battle: SAF and allied forces used disinformation to block evacuation calls and deflect criticism. At the same time, the RSF seized on the camp's militarisation to justify continued attacks.

In this way, El Fasher was reframed in SAF discourse as a symbol of unity and resistance—one increasingly defined in racial terms against the RSF. As the RSF amassed forces around the city, the outcome became increasingly foreseeable. By placing civilians in contested spaces and stoking ethnic division and hate speech, SAF helped create the conditions in which RSF violations could unfold at scale. Civilian suffering thus became instrumental - not accidental - in a political contest over legitimacy.

International failure and limits of diplomacy

Against this backdrop, in the buildup to these attacks, the international response to El Fasher was weak-willed. Diplomacy and human rights advocacy failed to secure decisive protection for civilians.

The United Nations and the African Union, in particular, fell short at a critical moment. The UN—[whose special envoy had already become a source of controversy](#)—failed to deploy around El Fasher, [citing the need for permission from the SAF](#)—permission that was repeatedly delayed and ultimately never granted.

Diplomatically, it continued with the naive approach: to lift El Fasher's siege without first establishing a credible civilian protection strategy. Meanwhile, the African Union was fragmented and wasted time hosting political talks among civilians when the situation demanded nothing less than an immediate ceasefire.

The tragedy in El Fasher reveals how armed political legitimacy in Sudan is being constructed through the deliberate endangerment of civilians. The atrocities carried out by the RSF—characterized by systematic attacks on civilians, mass displacement, and widespread abuses — must be unequivocally condemned. These acts are severe violations that require accountability. However, understanding the broader dynamics of the conflict remains crucial. The RSF did not arise in a vacuum; it embodies the most extreme form of a long-standing system of militarized governance and political violence manipulation.

The international community must recognize that Sudan has now reached a tipping point. The system that produced these forces cannot simply be restored, nor can the country return to the fragile arrangements of the past. The current war represents the culmination of decades of militarized politics, ethnic manipulation, and institutional decay.

In such a context, civilian suffering is not merely collateral damage—it is part of the strategy. If the international community cannot halt Sudan's war, it must at least stop rewarding these tactics. It should reject legitimacy narratives grounded in civilian entrapment and insist unequivocally on protection, evacuation, and accountability.

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