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Egypt's Sudan Dilemma in 2026: Backing the State, Containing the RSF, and Avoiding a Quagmire

By

Gulf State Analytics



7 January 2025

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- ✧ Egypt views Sudan as a core part of its strategic orbit and sees the Sudanese Armed Forces as the primary guarantor of state stability.
- ✧ Cairo perceives the Rapid Support Forces as a destabilising militia that threatens Egypt's national security, border stability, and Nile water interests.
- ✧ Military cooperation between Egypt and Sudan intensified prior to the war, culminating in joint exercises and deepened security coordination.
- ✧ Following the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, Egypt emerged as the most consistent external backer of General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Sudan's army
- ✧ Rapid Support Forces' territorial advances have significantly heightened Cairo's security concerns.
- ✧ Public Rapid Support Forces accusations in late 2024 brought Egypt's previously discreet support for the Sudanese Armed Forces into the open and escalated tensions.
- ✧ Egypt has issued "red line" warnings, signaling its readiness to intervene militarily under bilateral defense agreements if core interests are further threatened.
- ✧ Cairo seeks to manage the Sudan crisis through coordination with Saudi Arabia, and alignment with a potentially more active U.S. role in 2026.
- ✧ As the conflict extends into 2026, Egypt faces a narrowing set of options between diplomatic containment and direct military involvement to defend its southern frontier.

Key Picture: The Border Between Egypt and Sudan



Source: [The Border Institute](#)

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of Sudan's current conflict in April 2023, Egypt has emerged as the Arab state most supportive of General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Viewing the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) as a nefarious and destabilising militia that imperils its national interests, Cairo has watched the group's recent territorial advances with mounting concern. Against this backdrop, speculation is growing that Egypt may pursue a military intervention in 2026, aimed at safeguarding Sudan's state institutions from an RSF takeover.

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2. Sudan in Egypt's Strategic Orbit

For decades, Sudan has occupied a central place within Egypt's strategic orbit. Cairo has long regarded its southern neighbor as a natural sphere of influence, with the Sudanese army serving as the primary guarantor of order. This perspective closely mirrors Egypt's own civil-military paradigm, in which the national armed forces are viewed as the cornerstone of political stability.

Sudan's 2018–19 revolution, which toppled longtime autocratic president Omar al-Bashir, created an opening for Egypt—alongside the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia—to expand its influence in Khartoum at the expense of Turkey and Qatar. At the time, both Ankara and Doha were at odds with Cairo over disputes surrounding the Muslim Brotherhood's regional role. Military cooperation between Egypt and Sudan soon intensified, culminating in a March 2021 agreement on training and border security and a series of joint exercises.¹ These developments were followed months later by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan's coup against Sudan's civilian transitional authorities, further entrenching ties between Cairo and Khartoum.

3. From Quiet Support to Open Confrontation: Egypt, the SAF, and the RSF Escalation

Concerned about potential spillover into southern Egypt, the security of the Nile, and other strategic interests, Cairo has long viewed Sudan's conflict with grave apprehension. Until October 2024, when Hemedti publicly accused Egypt of direct involvement, Cairo's support for the SAF remained largely opaque and informal. Once these allegations surfaced, multiple government sources and Western media outlets confirmed Egypt's backing of the SAF, prompting the RSF to retaliate by banning exports from territories under its control. The embargo targeted a wide range of products—including gum Arabic, gold, minerals, oil, grains, sorghum, hibiscus, livestock, and peanuts.² Fundamentally political rather than economic in nature, the ban sent a clear and unequivocal message to Egypt.

By June 2025, the RSF had seized control of the Sudan-Libya-Egypt border triangle.³ That development marked a major victory for Hemedti and his paramilitary forces, who secured a position on Egypt's doorstep after suffering several defeats to the SAF earlier in the year. This tri-border region holds significant strategic importance as a hub for trade and smuggling routes. RSF control over the area allowed the group to dominate key supply lines along Sudan's borders with Chad and Libya, diminishing the SAF's leverage over essential resources. For Cairo, this development was deeply concerning, as it risked fueling increased unrest and illicit activity along the Sudanese border, presenting a mounting challenge to Egypt's interests in a conflict it had long sought to avoid engaging with directly.

With Donald J. Trump entering the Oval Office in January 2025, the U.S. administration initially took little action on Sudan. That changed ten months into his second term, when Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) made a landmark visit to Washington. According to Trump's own statements, the conflict had been off his radar prior to the meeting, but his team would now seek to address it.⁴ For Egypt, which has a vested interest in seeing the conflict resolved, this renewed U.S. focus is welcome, offering the prospect of momentum behind diplomatic efforts in 2026. By coordinating with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, the White House positions Cairo as a key actor with a voice at the table. Yet, the practical implications of any potential U.S. actions remain uncertain.

4. Red Lines and Regional Diplomacy: Egypt's Choices in a Crowded Geopolitical Arena

As 2025 drew to a close, escalating clashes between the SAF and RSF prompted Cairo to issue a stark warning against crossing “red lines” in Sudan. The statement underscored that Egypt could intervene militarily under the existing bilateral defense agreement, asserting its “full right to take all measures and actions guaranteed by international law and by the joint defence agreement between the two brotherly countries.”⁵ The warning followed closely on a visit by Burhan to Cairo, where he met with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to explore avenues for ending the Sudanese conflict and strengthening bilateral cooperation across multiple domains.⁶

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Throughout 2026, Egypt may face difficult choices regarding its role in Sudan. Whether Cairo ultimately intervenes militarily or opts for restraint remains to be seen. In any case, Egypt is likely to work closely with Saudi Arabia to help resolve the conflict, while also seeking to preserve its strong ties with the UAE despite occasional divergences between Cairo and Abu Dhabi over Sudan. At the same time, with Turkey and Iran engaged in the crisis in various capacities, Egypt will account for the interests and aims of Ankara and Tehran as both join Cairo in backing the SAF, all while positioning itself to respond to a more assertive U.S. policy toward the conflict, should one emerge this year.

As Sudan's conflict extends into 2026, Egypt faces an increasingly constrained set of options. Cairo's support for the SAF reflects both ideological alignment and pressing security concerns. Yet the RSF's advances along Egypt's southern border have heightened the risks and costs of continued restraint. The central challenge for Egyptian policymakers is to assert credible red lines without triggering a deeper military entanglement that could destabilise borders and strain regional partnerships. Coordination with Saudi Arabia and potentially a more engaged U.S. administration may still provide diplomatic avenues to contain the crisis. Ultimately, Egypt's handling of Sudan will test whether its regional influence can be exercised through alignment and pressure alone, or whether force will become unavoidable to safeguard core security interests and enforce Cairo's “red lines.”

NOTES

¹ <https://sudantribune.com/article/67401>

² <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2597630>

³ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sudan/capture-tri-border-area-marks-another-twist-sudans-civil-war>

⁴ <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-announces-us-making-new-effort-end-war/story?id=127683382>

⁵ <https://www.newarab.com/news/egypt-hints-possible-intervention-sudans-brutal-war>

⁶ <https://www.africanews.com/2025/10/16/sudans-al-burhan-visits-cairo-for-talks-with-egypts-el-sisi/>