



## Season 3 Episode 1

### War in Sudan

#### *Episode Transcript*

**Annie:** This podcast contains content that may be alarming to some listeners. Listener discretion is advised. As always, the views, thoughts, and opinions expressed by our guests are their own, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of CIVIC or PAX.

**Intro Clip:** Every day, 100 civilians are killed in conflict and countless more are harmed, yet their perspectives are often missing from the stories we tell about war. This is the Civilian Protection Podcast. A monthly podcast produced by CIVIC and PAX.

**Annie:** Hello everyone, and welcome back to Season 3 of the Civilian Protection Podcast. I'm Annie Shiel, US Advocacy Director at Center for Civilians in Conflict, or CIVIC.

**Marc:** And I'm Marc Garlasco, Military Advisor from PAX. Our organizations both work in conflicts around the world to protect civilians caught in war.

**Annie:** And this season, we will be exploring civilian protection issues in light of current events, as well as what the headlines might be missing.

**Marc:** And for today's episode, we'll be focused on the conflict in Sudan, which, since April, has continued to exact a horrifying toll on civilians.

**Annie:** And to do that, joining us today is our guest, Kholood Khair, the Founder and Director of Confluence Advisory, a think-and-do tank previously based in Khartoum. Welcome, Kholood, and thank you so much for joining us.

**Kholood:** Thank you, Annie, Marc.

**Annie:** Can you start by just telling us a little bit about yourself?

**Kholood:** Sure. I was splitting my time between London and Khartoum prior to the outbreak of the conflict and I ran a think tank there that was trying to sort of figure out questions around governance, the economy and peace and security, the sort of main issues plaguing Sudan during its transition after the fall of Omar al-Bashir.

**Annie:** And for listeners who aren't maybe as familiar, can you start by explaining what is happening in Sudan right now and why?

**Kholood:** Well, for the past four months or so, there has been a very violent and very intense war between the Sudan Armed Forces and a paramilitary force called the Rapid Support Forces. The interesting thing about this case is that these are two parts of the same military security project. The RSF and the SAF were allies until very recently. They deposed Omar al-Bashir together after 30 years of his dictatorship. They led a coup together in October of 2021 and they effectively ran the military-led government during the transition together. But cracks had started to show almost as soon as they deposed Omar al-Bashir in that they had wanted very different things. And this came to a head really after the coup of October 2021, when their interests diverged markedly. They had very different income streams, they had very different foreign policies, they had very different ideas about how they wanted to consolidate the coup that they had led together. And so they had started to create constituencies for these very differing views. There was a sort of a peace political process, if you will, a post-coup political process that was set up by lots of different international entities, including the UN, the African Union, the regional sort of body, the EGAD, as well as bilateral access like the US, the United Kingdom, Saudi and the United Arab Emirates. And that process was designed to bring about a new transitional government after the coup had effectively ended the other one. But this process and the agreement that it enshrined ended up tipping the balance of power between the two generals at the helm, General Burhan for the Sudan Armed Forces, and the head of the Rapid Support Forces, General Hamedti. And so tensions really came to a head. And then issues around resolving a hierarchy in a military council, in a new military council, and the level and speed of integration of the paramilitary forces into the regular army really sort of triggered the start of this conflict. Now, for a lot of people, we could see this coming. It's very clear. That with the troop movements, particularly by the paramilitary forces into Khartoum, with very bellicose language being used in the months in the run up to the war, of both sides not wanting to team up together and work together to build a new transitional period, with very significantly different foreign policy objectives of both the generals, it became pretty clear that the differences between them were starting to become irreconcilable. And, you know, true enough, on the morning of the 15th of April, the first shots were heard and the fighting had started. Interestingly, we don't know who, to this day, who fired the first shot. But what we do know is that both sides were very, very ready to mount this war.

**Annie:** Thank you so much, Kholood. And I wanted to ask, you spoke about this a little bit, but going back in time a little bit, how should listeners put the current conflict in historical context in terms of, you know, how should we think about this conflict in relation to other moments in Sudan's recent history, including previous atrocities in Darfur, you mentioned the 2019 revolution, anything else like that?

**Kholood:** So, you know, Sudan has had a very, very bloody post-colonial history. I think, you know, if we look at the history, there has only been about 10 years or so of peace in the whole 65 year history of Sudan. And that's because the central government had inherited this very

predatory nature from the colonial era, and it had never tried to, sort of undo that. And because of that, we've had spates of rebellions, we've had sort of different armed political uprisings in different parts of the country. We've had non-violent political uprisings in the country as well, and they've been pretty successful in deposing three different dictators in the past 60 years. So, you know, sort of a higher average, even in the region, if we think of the Arab Spring and the sort of Horn of Africa and the rest of Africa. But it is these armed uprisings against the central state that really have characterized this war. And in many ways, the same actors that we've seen, rebel leaders, paramilitary groups, the Sudan Armed Forces' top brass, which is made up mostly of Islamists, these are the same actors who've been propagating the conflicts in Sudan for at least the past 30 years.

**Marc:** Hey Kholood, thank you so much for putting that into context, really appreciate it. It's really quite shocking how rapidly this conflict has evolved. Can you give us kind of an idea of how this has impacted civilians, and from the first sparks of this conflict to today, what kinds of harms we're seeing meted out against them?

**Kholood:** We have to remember that by the time the fighting broke out on April 15th, Sudan had been already several months or more than a year post coup. And it's the coup that really started to make things very difficult for civilians. So inflation was going through the roof. There was no real government to speak of. And so sort of the social protection elements that the transitional government had wanted to instate were very difficult to bring about and so people, ordinary people, were suffering markedly.

**Marc:** And here you're speaking specifically about the coup against Bashir?

**Kholood:** No, I'm talking about the coup against the transitional civilian government under Dr. Abdalla Hamdok. So this is the coup of 2021. And since that coup of 2021, there has been a sort of very steady, but very significant decline in people's living conditions. And this war has exacerbated that massively, of course. I mean, Khartoum, it's not, I think, an exaggeration to say. though it is very disheartening to acknowledge that the Khartoum that we knew is gone. And when we see pictures today of what the city looks like, the streets, particularly the central areas, the markets, that has all been destroyed. The sort of industrial sector also has been completely annihilated. Grain reserves have also been looted, people's homes, people's businesses, people's offices, people haven't been to work. Those who are still in Khartoum, for example, haven't been to work, of course, since the war started. They have not been paid either, whether they work in the public sector or the private sector. So people have suddenly found themselves in the middle of a war zone, despite previously having been gearing up for the festival of Eid at the end of Ramadan, finding them living in a capital city where many more services were available than in other parts of the country. Khartoum was a city where different parts, different communities in the country that had been fleeing conflicts there, particularly for example in Darfur or the Kordofan region or the Blue Nile region, had relocated to Khartoum, suddenly found themselves in another conflict zone, again displaced to parts unknown, whether it's within the bounds of Sudan or outside. And there's this massive upheaval, you know, without money, without security, without shelter, with a food insecurity crisis that is coming to, I would

say, famine stages probably by September, by the harvest season. And so it's been a seismic change for civilians. There's also been a war economy that has exacerbated the pre-existing inflation that was, I think, the third in the world. And so people's lives were pretty terrible. Before the war and now they are, you know, sort of cataclysmic. They're not able to, frankly, live and survive in ways that they could before. All of their previous coping mechanisms cannot, you know, stand up to the sort of degradation that we've seen since the war. And so displacement has been rife. You know, conservative estimates are that there have been around four million people displaced. The official figures don't track everyone that has been displaced, similarly figures of people who have been killed. It's around 4,000 or so that have officially been recorded. But local groups, particularly local pro-democracy groups that have been tracking events in their neighborhoods say that those are very conservative estimates, particularly when we look at the violence that has hit Darfur. And this is the thing about this conflict, though it started in Khartoum and it's the war about power between two military factions, it's very quickly spread to areas where there had been protracted conflict and where those conflicts had not been resolved, particularly Darfur, the Kordofan region and Blue Nile. We could see it also spread to other parts of the country that had been deemed reasonably stable until now. And that's because we're very much at the cusp of an all-out civil war and we're already starting to see indications of that. And of course, what that means is that safety and security for civilians, as little as there is, and as sort of meager as they can find, will soon be almost non-existent.

**Marc:** So, you're speaking about a humanitarian crisis, right, and we've seen high levels of not only displacement but civilian casualties. So, what are we seeing in terms of the humanitarian need as a result of the challenges of this conflict?

**Kholood:** I mean, primarily people require shelter because a lot of people have been internally displaced. Secondly, and a very close second, people require food and nutrition. Sudan is an agricultural hub. It has one of the most, sort of, fertile regions and arable lands in the world because of the Niles really. But it is now in a stage where it cannot feed its citizens. The planting season has come and gone, and very little has been planted, which means that come September, very little will be harvested. And at the same time, international organizations that work in the delivery of food, for example, the World Food Programme and others, are unable to meet the humanitarian needs of people seeking food. Where they are able to get some supplies into the country through the port in the east, it's very difficult to then get it inland to parts of, for example, Khartoum or Gezira State. And certainly much more difficult to get it all the way west into Darfur. And so we are seeing now some humanitarian channels opening up potentially from the western border with Chad. But even then getting food supplies into Khartoum, which is geographically situated right in the middle of Sudan, will be difficult and we're already seeing reports from local political groups, local neighborhood groups, saying that people are sort of in the beginning stages of starvation. And so the situation which has already been desperate and which has been increasingly becoming more and more desperate over the past four months is now really, I think, facing a horrific stage where even if some humanitarian needs are sort of being met, and that by no means is the picture all over the country, it may be too late by the time it can get to where it needs to go. The UN has set up a funding meeting last month, I believe, to get some funding in for Sudan. I think they asked for about 2.5 billion US dollars. The

amount pledged was 1.6 billion, so far below what is expected. And this is in part because a lot of international funds have been committed to other countries, particularly, of course, the conflict in Ukraine. But at the same time, we're also seeing, I think, a lot of fatigue, I think, around conflicts in the Horn of Africa region, where Sudan is also situated. And that frankly just means that a lot of, millions of people are at the cusp of dying or starvation. So it's not, I think the international community needs to do a lot more to scramble the kind of support that is required to avoid that scenario.

**Annie:** And with these enormous gaps in the international response, as you've just noted, we've heard about emergency committees being set up by communities to help address community needs. Can you talk a little bit more about what these committees are and how they're organizing to address humanitarian need?

**Kholood:** Sure. So the Emergency Response Rooms or ERRs are neighborhood based response sort of chambers, if you will. What that means is that you have mostly young people from the neighborhood organizing themselves primarily at the sort of the early stages to help people find access to medical, for example, support to medication, which was very much sort of, missing, let's say, or very difficult to find. And to help people find food, shelter, safety, safe routes out of the more dangerous areas as the fighting spread. They have now sort of matured, even in the short four months that they've been established, and they are doing, you know, have been doing direct humanitarian response in lieu of the international organizations, the NGOs that were in Khartoum and in Sudan before then. Of course, a lot of these, a lot of the people that make up these emergency response rooms are just ordinary citizens from the neighborhood. And they've found themselves thrust into this first responder role, primarily because of the collapse of the state and therefore of the services that were available in health and nutrition, and also to some degree in just general public safety.

**Marc:** Marc jumping in here for a quick aside. As Kholood described, one thing that's really notable about these emergency response rooms is how quickly that they've been able to stand up and organize and provide support to communities. So the team at PAX spoke to an emergency committee coordinator in Darfur, who emphasized that this was possible because many of these groups emerged from the neighborhood Resistance Committees that have organized Sudan's pro-democracy movement since 2019. Check out our episode description and bonus materials for more. But for now back to Kholood on the support that these groups need.

**Kholood:** But they need a lot of support. And there has been a lot of, sort of input, from particularly the diaspora, where they have been sending funds to these groups so that they're able to locally source, particularly medication, food, et cetera. But of course this only works if the medication and the food is already in the country or at least within reach. Soon enough, that won't be the case as supplies that were there before April will start to dwindle and completely dry up. And so there are more moves now to get international organizations who do have access to, for example, food, medication, et cetera, and linking them up with some of these Emergency Response Rooms so that at least they're able to sort of help them to strengthen

their capabilities. Now the danger there is that there's a risk that these groups could then become targets, because the way that they have been working so far has been very much under the radar. And in that way, they've been able to evade to some degree, although not entirely, the attention of the security actors, the belligerents, but they've also been able to stay away from state capture. One thing that both sides of this conflict, the Sudan Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, learned very well from the Bashir regime is how to capture aid. And both of them have sort of set up, well, there's already, the Sudan Armed Forces already had the National Humanitarian Aid Commission, which it started to instrumentalize for its own purposes to capture aid. And now we've recently seen the Rapid Support Forces set up its own body precisely to do that. There have to be sort of, I think, smarter ways of working. The usual humanitarian means of delivery, the business as usual, no longer applies in this context. And we have an opportunity here to actually get aid to where it needs to go, rather than working with these quote unquote formal institutions that won't actually take aid to where it needs to go, but instead working with local groups in a way that they deem safe and in a way that they believe will maximize their ability to deliver. But that is still sort of a process of sort of trying to figure out what that looks like and how best to maximize on those opportunities.

**Annie:** Are there other ways that you're seeing civilians and communities organizing to protect themselves, to meet their needs, and/or other ways that the international community should be supporting those kinds of movements and local expertise as you noted?

**Kholood:** So, you know, several weeks ago, the head of the Sudan Armed Forces, General Burhan, put out a general mobilization. So he effectively said, you know, all able-bodied young men, and I think some women as well, should take up arms and come to the nearest army military base for training. Now some people have heeded that call, in large part because of the sense of insecurity they have felt and the breakdown of law and order. Now, what the paramilitary forces have been doing almost since the start of this war is invading people's homes, committing all sorts of abuses, particularly sexual abuses against primarily women, but not exclusively, and girls. And people have felt a dire sense of lack of security, and a complete breakdown of rule of law. You know, the police force has been completely absent, of course, and therefore people have been moved to take up arms themselves. Now, some people have done so without answering the call of the Sudan Armed Forces and going to the nearest camp, but there have been reports of civilians arming themselves effectively, those who have stayed in situ and have not moved, arming themselves in preparation for a home invasion, in preparation for being sort of caught up in the conflict. Now, obviously, if that happens at scale, then what you have effectively is a civil war. You no longer have a fight in an urban setting between two sort of formalized military forces, but you have ordinary civilians picking up arms, at which point not only will it become very dire for civilians and the death toll can expect, we can expect to rise very sharply, but it also means that, you know, mediating and ending this conflict will no longer be, will be far less straightforward, let's put it that way. You won't have to deal with just two primary belligerents, but a whole host of different groups. And we might also see the defragmentation of the two main groups, the Sudan Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, if the more local conflict dynamics supersede the conflict going on at the national level, which to some degree we have seen not just in Darfur, but in some of the Kordofan regions.

And so, you know, I think the element, the necessity here is one of speed. The international community, if there is to be an effort that is put forward to genuinely deal with the issues that this war brings to the fore, one it has to be fast, at least fast enough to try and seize the very military nature of this, so it doesn't become more complex, but at the same time to try and save life as much as possible, which is not something that we have really seen any of the negotiation platforms really put, you know, taken to mind. But there has to, there is an opportunity here to try and formulate a different state setup for Sudan. And that requires more engagement with civilian actors. And so far, we simply haven't seen enough civilian engagement, either in the US-Saudi sort of talks in Jeddah, nor in the Egypt-Egyptian neighboring countries initiative, nor in the EGAD or AU tracks that we have seen in Nairobi and in Addis Ababa. Civilians have been markedly missing from all of those talks so far. And what that means effectively is the way that this conflict could be resolved is through a power sharing deal between the two armed belligerent groups, leaving very little space for sort of civilian voices. Now, obviously what that means is that we will effectively be pushing pause on this conflict rather than ending it, because at any point in the future the same issues that led to this war could really sort of come to the surface and we could see this war reignite at a later stage. But I think where the opportunity is this time is that Burhan and Hemedti, the heads of these two, of either side, they have spent a lot of time trying to fashion themselves into redeemable, pro-democracy, sort of champions of pro-democracy, as laughable as that may seem. But I think what this war has shown is that actually neither of them has the legitimacy to be able to sort of lead a government, or indeed to bring about stability, not just in Sudan, but in the region. And therefore, both of them have effectively forfeited any claim to be either heads of state or indeed part of a future government. So there is a real chance here to engage civilians, to bring about a civilian pro-democracy dispensation in Sudan. But it has to be taken seriously and it cannot just be a sort of an afterthought to talks of a ceasefire between the two belligerents.

**Marc:** So you've spoken about the potential for resolution to the conflict. And looking forward I'm wondering, are there realistic prospects for that right now? Something in the short term, what's needed for that to happen? Or is this something that is going to develop over time?

**Kholood:** So, I mean, I think the basic reality is that neither side is done fighting for now, but both sides will at some point reach the conclusion that they cannot win this war militarily. And that's because, you know, all the wars that I mentioned earlier, and there have been many in Sudan, you know, the first Sudanese Civil War lasted 18 years, the second Sudanese Civil War lasted 22 years, the Darfur conflict started in 2003 and has never really ended, so that's 20 years and counting, this could go on for a very long time. But all of those conflicts have to some degree been, if not resolved, then at least momentarily ceased through mediated political settlements. And there is every chance that this war will sort of end or conclude to some degree in that same way. And so the quicker the belligerents get to the conclusion that this is where that's heading, the quicker we could potentially see an end to loss of life. Now, the current calculus of both of these soldiers is even if they can't win a military victory, if they keep the war going, perhaps they can bring about a political victory. In other words, they can bring about enough public support for their positions and then enter into negotiations from a stronger position. Obviously, that is a very callous calculation because it means that many people

continue to die until such time that they feel that they're in a strong enough position to meaningfully engage with mediations. But, you know, we don't think we have the luxury of waiting for these actors to sort of, you know, get to the conclusion that killing people is bad. And so we need to frankly see a lot more pressure be put on their regional backers, in particular, the United Arab Emirates and the way that it's been supporting the Rapid Support Forces has meant that the Rapid Support Forces has actually not been very meaningfully engaged in any of the mediation platforms, sub-par though they are. And in terms of the Sudanese Armed Forces, they've historically always only meaningfully engaged in mediation when they have felt that they are in a strong position militarily. Now, facts on the ground suggest that they probably won't be in a very significantly strong military position at any point in the next few months. And so they also need to be pressured to engage in these mediations. You know, every war needs, every warring side needs blood and it needs treasure. You know, both sides have tried to recruit. I'm not sure how much of a sort of an end to those recruitments we can put, but certainly in terms of their financial supply lines and access to, sort of their bank accounts outside of the country, that enable them to buy weapons and to keep recruiting, that is something that needs to be focused on in order to change the calculus of these generals. Because right now, particularly for the Rapid Support Forces, they have sort of an endless money supply that has allowed them to, even in the past few weeks, continue to bring in supplies to keep this war going.

**Marc:** So if we look then, at how to protect civilians, as long as the war does continue, we're going to see continuing and rising deaths. What else is needed now, what's needed right now, to protect civilians in Sudan? What do you hope to see, whether it's from governments, or communities, or others, what can be done?

**Kholood:** Well, the sort of the first and more obvious step would be a ceasefire. But considering how elusive that has been, it really only opens up the opportunity for an armed international presence that would be able to at least create some safe zones and some humanitarian corridors. Both the RSF and the Sudan Armed Forces had in Jeddah in May signed agreements to say that they would provide those humanitarian corridors and that they would provide safe spaces for people trying to flee. None of that has come to pass. And so I think it's high time we sort of stop hoping that they will suddenly adhere to those agreements that they made, now several months ago, and really discuss seriously bringing in an armed international force. Now initially the East African Standby Force, which is a subsidiary of the sort of broader African Union military forces was mooted as a potential force to come in. Now the Sudan Armed Forces was very quick to say that it would consider that a breach of its sovereignty and very quickly put the kibosh on that. But I think we should continue to revisit that as an option because it is sort of the regional standby force that should be able to be deployed reasonably quickly and that would have, that both sides would see as legitimate. Now, failing that, UN peacekeepers, or potentially in addition to UN peacekeepers, should also be considered to be brought in. Now, what we've seen very clearly from the UN is it has very little appetite to bring in peacekeepers and to, frankly, to fund them. And so this goes hand in hand with the issue of how much money the Sudan response can muster from international organizations, including the UN. But if we're looking at preventing loss of life, we have to consider seriously bringing in international armed forces that can secure to some degree different areas and therefore allow some citizens to at



least feel a sense of physical safety until such time a ceasefire can be entered into meaningfully.

**Annie:** And, Kholood, as we wrap up, is there anything else that you want listeners to take away from our discussion today?

**Kholood:** It's difficult not to despair, I think, when looking at Sudan for several reasons. One, I think to many outsiders, it feels like all they ever hear about Sudan is that it's in a war and that there's displacement and famine and all sorts of apocalyptic things. But there is a chance here in Sudan to really rewrite its future. As I said, you know, both parts of this security sector, the Sudan Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, having committed abuses, particularly the Rapid Support Forces, and having abrogated all sorts of responsibilities that they had, particularly the Sudan Armed Forces, they've sort of written themselves off, I think, as credible political actors. And this should open up, potentially for the first time ever really, a genuine path towards civilian leadership in the country. The other thing is that owing to the revolution which unseated Bashir in 2018-2019, we now have a very broad, nationwide network of political actors in the neighborhood resistance committees that have, you know, outlasted sort of massacres, the coup, and now the war. And they remain active and they remain the only guarantors, really, for a stable, peaceful, civilian Sudan, and there has never been a better time to bring that about than now. I think what it requires is concerted, coordinated, it's a key word, effort by international actors to really see that vision, to see a third way, not a way that is led by the Sudan Armed Forces, not a way that's led by the Rapid Support Forces, in a way that moves us away from a military rule. There has been a calculation by the international community that, you know, stability comes in khaki. And I think this war should have, I would hope, disabused people of that notion. But it requires another, it requires greater effort, frankly, not just an acknowledgement of this fact, to bring about civilian democracy. And Sudan's civilian landscape is messy, it's varied, it's rich, it's very well established. It's not a linear group that can just sort of be brought about to rubber stamp a peace deal. And I think that in itself is an opportunity. We're trying to bring about a democracy. Democracy is messy. That should be embraced and every opportunity should be taken to bring about the kind of sort of platforms necessary to allow Sudan, Sudanese civilians to rethink and reimagine their state and to sort of bring that about and then hopefully in a way that preserves life as much and as quickly as possible.

**Annie:** Thank you so much, Kholood.

**Kholood:** Thank you Annie, thank you, Marc.

**Annie:** In other Sudan news, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have both recently documented escalating attacks in Darfur, as well as mass civilian casualties caused by warring parties and rampant sexual and gender-based violence during the conflict. And just this week, coalitions representing over 275 civil society organizations wrote to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and UK Foreign Minister James Cleverly emphasizing the risk of atrocities and genocide in Sudan and urging their governments to take urgent action. This and more, including more on the work and history of neighborhood resistance committees and emergency response

rooms, in the episode description wherever you're listening.

**Marc:** That's it for today's episode of the Civilian Protection Podcast.

**Annie:** The Civilian Protection Podcast is brought to you by Center for Civilians in Conflict and PAX – two NGOs working to improve the lives of civilians in conflict. Today's episode was written by Annie Shiel, Marc Garlasco, and Erin Bijl, and produced by the Podcast Guru. Hajer Naili and Matt Longmore made sure we're online. Thank you to our guest, Kholood Khair, for joining and sharing her expertise.

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