



Where South Sudan Might Be Heading

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On 26 March in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, an armed convoy – including the Minister of Defence and top security officials – entered the residence of Riek Machar, the First Vice President of the ‘Revitalised Government of National Unity of the Republic of South Sudan.’ Machar and his wife Angelina Teny (who was also Minister of the Interior) were placed under house arrest and their bodyguards were disarmed.² This new crisis is the latest in a series of events that affected South Sudan since the conclusion of the 2018 peace agreement.³ Why did it happen now? How is it connected to the war in Sudan? And are any external actors contributing to this new situation?

A multi-ethnic country

South Sudan gained independence from Sudan in 2011. It is home to about 64 ethnic groups, each of which generally has its own language and traditions. The two largest ethnic groups are the Dinka and the Nuer. President Salva Kiir is aligned with the Dinka while his political rival, Riek Machar, is aligned with the Nuer. Although this diversity could have constituted an opportunity for South Sudan, had it been managed after the country gained independence, several sources note that it has instead been manipulated and nurtured by both the political elite and rebel groups, thereby weakening fragile institutions.⁴ A 2022 study showed that the major causes of ethnic conflict in South Sudan are unfair allocation of political positions, corruption and nepotism within the government system as well as power struggles among the elites.⁵

The 2018 peace agreement

South Sudan, so far, has not held any elections. Until 2013, President Salva Kiir and his political rival, Riek Machar, governed the country in a power sharing alliance that collapsed in December 2013, leading to interethnic violence and civil war, in which hundreds of thousands were killed. But the signature of the 2018 peace agreement ended

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² “Dr. Machar under house arrest mid rising tensions,” *Radio Tamazuj*, March 26, 2025, <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/breaking-dr-machar-under-house-arrest-mid-rising-tensions?fbclid=IwY2xjawJTdZZleHRuA2FlbQlxMQABHU8j6daFNvgKy5RIj4NDNT4gia0KJWYnOQcvVnWE9rAiHxNQRidRViwaem-xz8NSz2kMSXTaxAWeddw>; Wycliffe Muia & Ashley Lime, “VP’s arrest ends South Sudan peace deal, his party says,” *BBC News*, March 27, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0q1jppzp4no>.

³ The 2018 peace agreement is known officially as the ‘Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan’.

⁴ Kuol Garang, “The Ethnic Roots of South Sudan’s Conflict,” *Australasian Review of African Studies* 41, no. 2 (2020): 87-104, <https://afsaap.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/5-The-Ethnic-Roots-of-South-Sudans-Conflict-KUOL-GARANG-pp-87-104.pdf>.

⁵ Timothy T. Kulang, Chidiebere C. Ogbonna & Wotsuna Khamalwa, “South Sudan: Ethnicity and Statehood. Perceptions and the Way Forward,” *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, no. 31, April 2020: 41-55, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340952732_South_Sudan_Ethnicity_and_Statehood_Perceptions_and_the_Way_Forward.

the war.⁶ Nevertheless, a key element explaining the current crisis is the lack of implementation of the 2018 peace agreement. According to Daniel Akech Thiong of the International Crisis Group (ICG), “only 10% of the agreement has been implemented”, the armed forces have not been unified, there is no clear legal framework for the country and voter registration has not been renewed.⁷ In addition, “low political will, trust deficit among the parties to the accord and lack of predictable funding” should also be considered.⁸

War in Sudan

Furthermore, events in South Sudan can hardly be dissociated from what is happening in Sudan. Indeed, a few days after the house arrest of Riek Machar in Juba, clashes were reported along the Sudan-South Sudan border in Upper Nile State, between Sudan’s paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF)⁹ and South Sudan’s main armed opposition, the SPLA-IO,¹⁰ which led the *Sudans Post* to suggest that “RSF forces are operating from within South Sudanese territory.”¹¹ In addition, several sources warn that the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) appear to be using their ties with militias in South Sudan, possibly supplying them with weapons,¹² “to counter any RSF efforts to use South Sudan as a rear support base.”¹³

Oil

Another key element to be considered is oil. Indeed, on 10 February 2024, a “major rupture” occurred in the so-called Petrodar pipeline that carried crude oil from South Sudan through Sudanese territory to Port Sudan. The event occurred in northern White Nile State, a Sudanese territory controlled by the RSF.¹⁴ Because of the ongoing conflict, the pipeline was not expected to be fixed in the near future.¹⁵ As a result, South Sudan lost two thirds of its state revenues, opening the possibility that the RSF “intentionally allowed the pipeline to fall into disrepair, given that transit fees were accruing primarily to its rivals in Port Sudan, forcing Kiir to open high-stakes negotiations with the RSF to resume oil flows.”¹⁶ Since January 2025, several reports indicated a rapprochement between South Sudan’s leadership and the RSF,¹⁷ leading the Institute for the Study of War to write that “SAF and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) are likely backing opposing sides in South Sudan, which risks fuelling a possible civil war in South Sudan.”¹⁸

⁶ United Nations, “South Sudan: Postponing long-awaited elections ‘a regrettable development’,” *UN News*, November 7, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/11/1156661>; Center for Preventive Action, “Instability in South Sudan,” *Global Conflict Tracker* (Council of Foreign Relations), March 21, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-south-sudan>.

⁷ Daniel Akech Thiong, “Could South Sudan return to civil war?,” interview by Mpho Lakaje, *BBC Africa Daily*, March 7, 2025, audio, 05:35, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0kwms9>.

⁸ United Nations, “‘No Appetite for Another Extension’ of South Sudan Peace Agreement, Mission Head Tells Security Council, Urging Leaders Focus on Benchmarks without Delay,” Meetings Coverage Security Council, 9855th Meeting (AM), SC/15989, February 5, 2025, <https://press.un.org/en/2025/sc15989.doc.htm>.

⁹ Formed in 2013, the RSF has its origins in the notorious *Janjaweed* militia that were accused of ethnic cleansing against Darfur’s non-Arabic population. It has been fighting the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) since April 2023.

¹⁰ The Sudan People’s Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO) forms the armed wing of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) political party. Both are dominated by the Nuer people ethnic group and led by Riek Machar. They should be distinguished from the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), which are (accused of being) dominated by the Dinka ethnic group and affiliated mainly to president Salva Kiir.

¹¹ “SAF threatens to hold ‘corrupt’ South Sudan leadership accountable over RSF support,” *Sudans Post*, March 26, 2025, <https://www.sudanspost.com/saf-threatens-to-hold-corrupt-south-sudan-leadership-accountable-over-rsf-support>.

¹² Nosmot Gbadamosi, “Africa Brief: South Sudan edges closer to civil war,” *Foreign Policy*, April 2, 2025, <https://link.foreignpolicy.com/view/67dab5520088565e7f01ee1enddt3.5dp/df5dcab7>.

¹³ Institute for the Study of War, “Africa File, March 20, 2025: Qatari-Mediated Ceasefire in DRC; SAF Closes in on Khartoum; RSF Attacks Spread to South Sudan; Al Shabaab Ramadan Offensive; Tigray Simmers as Amhara Escalates; Russia’s Red Sea Efforts; Burkinabe Massacres,” Institute for the Study of War, March 25, 2025, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/africa-file-march-20-2025-qatari-mediated-ceasefire-drc-saf-closes-khartoum-rsf-attacks>.

¹⁴ “‘Major rupture’ in Sudan oil pipeline – War-related spill threatens pocketbook of Sudan’s southern neighbor,” *Sudan War Monitor*, March 20, 2024, <https://sudanwarmonitor.com/p/sudan-oil-pipeline-rupture>.

¹⁵ “S. Sudan’s Economy Set for Strong Rebound in 2025 as Oil Exports Resume,” *Ecofinagency*, February 12, 2025, <https://www.ecofinagency.com/public-management/1202-46421-s-sudan-s-economy-set-for-strong-rebound-in-2025-as-oil-exports-resume>.

¹⁶ International Crisis Group, “South Sudan on the Precipice of Renewed Full-blown War,” *Alert*, March 7, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/south-sudan/south-sudan-precipice-renewed-full-blown-war>.

¹⁷ Mat Nashed, “Is Sudan’s war merging with South Sudanese conflicts?,” *Al Jazeera*, March 29, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/3/29/sudans-war-risks-merging-with-conflict-in-south-sudan-say-analysts>; Barabara Plett-Usher, “Chad condemns Sudan’s airport threat as ‘declaration of war’,” *BBC News*, March 24, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn7v40e2p43o?tpcc=africa_brief&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Africa%20Brief%2004022025&utm_term=africa_brief.

¹⁸ Institute for the Study of War, “Africa File, March 20, 2025.”

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The UAE

South Sudan's recent rapprochement with the RSF came as Salva Kiir, the president of South Sudan, was preparing for a visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE).¹⁹ Several international and local sources reported the signature, on that occasion, of a deal between the UAE and South Sudan "to buy crude oil *in the ground* in advance for 20 years, worth up to \$12 billion." Under this deal, the UAE would buy "600,000 barrels per day at \$54 per barrel of Nile blend and \$22 per barrel of Dar Mix."²⁰ Simultaneously, the Netherlands-based media *Radio Tamazuj* reported that the UAE company Dynamic Defense Solutions had secured a deal "to supply vehicles to the South Sudan Army." Yet, South Sudan and the UAE company have denied the existence of any such deal.²¹

Uganda

In addition, on 25 March 2025, the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan denounced the deployment of Ugandan troops and their battle tanks in South Sudan, "following a request by the country's President," adding that "[t]his raises serious concerns over potential violations of the UN arms embargo and the growing partisan role of foreign forces, which further endangers civilians and risks regional escalation."²² These events could be just some among several violations of the UN arms embargo.²³ Indeed, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) – and despite the UN arms embargo –, "South Sudan recorded the second highest percentage increase in military spending globally in 2023... to reach \$1.1 billion."²⁴

¹⁹ "UAE President receives President of South Sudan," *Emirates News Agency-WAM*, February 8, 2025, <https://www.wam.ae/en/article/bi3l4vw-uae-president-receives-president-south-sudan>.

²⁰ "السودان جنوب نفط لشراء الأمدة طويلة صفقة توقع الإمارات" (UAE signs long-term deal to buy South Sudanese oil)," *Raboka News*, February 3, 2025, <https://rakobanews.com/sudan-economy/sudanese-economic-news/131510/>; Natasha White & Augusta Saraiva, "A Dubai Firm Pledged \$13 Billion for 20 Years of South Sudan Oil," *Bloomberg*, April 26, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-26/oil-backed-loans-dubai-firm-pledged-13-billion-for-20-years-of-south-sudan-oil?leadSource=uverify%20wall>.

²¹ Atak Ngor, "Opinion | Is South Sudan circumventing UN arms embargo?," *Radio Tamazuj*, October 28, 2024, <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/investigation-south-sudan-circumventing-un-arms-embargo>.

²² United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "South Sudan: Protection of civilians and adherence to peace agreement critical to preventing all-out war, warns UN Commission," March 27, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/03/south-sudan-protection-civilians-and-adherence-peace-agreement-critical>.

²³ United Nations, "Security Council Extends Sanctions Regime on South Sudan for One Year, Adopting Resolution 2731 (2024) by Vote of 9 in Favour, 6 Abstentions," Meetings Coverage Security Council, 9639th Meeting (AM), SC/15711, May 30, 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15711.doc.htm>.

²⁴ Nan Tian et al., "Trends in world military expenditure, 2023," *SIPRI Fact Sheet* (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), April 2024, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2404_fs_milex_2023.pdf.

Russia

During Salva Kiir's visit to Moscow in September 2023, President Putin saw relations between South Sudan and Russia as "developing very intensively".²⁵ The day after, the Russian Ministry of Defence stressed "the importance of the partnership between the military departments of Russia and South Sudan to ensure security and stability in Central Africa" and agreed on "further joint steps to develop bilateral relations in the military field".²⁶ A few weeks later, the Russian state-owned news agency TASS reported about "plans to train South Sudanese troops in Russia".²⁷ According to the Prague-based media *Current Time*, the Russian company Rosoboronexport "has been secretly and in small batches transporting weapons for the South Sudanese military" since at least 2019.²⁸

Conclusion

The house arrest of his main political rival can be seen as the latest step in Salva Kiir's consolidation of power: getting rid of opponents and dissenting voices,²⁹ capturing state assets for himself and his family,³⁰ abandoning the 2018 peace agreement, securing new international supporters such as the UAE or Russia, importing more weapons in violation of the UN arms embargo, bombing civilians with indiscriminate incendiary weapons³¹ and ruling his country in a way that mirrors how Sudan is run.³² Despite its nice words about implementing the 2018 peace agreement,³³ South Sudan's recent actions suggest that the country's leadership has chosen to become a one-party state centred around the person of Salva Kiir. Time will show though how such a one-party state can prevent the resumption of interethnic violence and civil war.

The current crisis, Kiir's brutal repression and a potential resumption of civil war will further increase the already extreme poverty and vulnerability of South Sudan's population, potentially driving more and more South Sudanese residents to leave for neighbouring countries, as well as for Europe.³⁴ Therefore, while the rules-based order is challenged across the region,³⁵ it is essential not to let the world's youngest nation drop off our radar. Recent efforts to restore dialogue between the parties to the 2018 peace agreement, promote the rule of law and sustain humanitarian assistance to affected communities are vital and must be supported. Also, the UN arms embargo should be extended and its violations recorded and denounced. The alternative is bleak.

²⁵ The Kremlin, "Российско-южносуданские переговоры (Russian-South Sudanese talks)," September 28, 2023, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72381>.

²⁶ "Шойгу провел встречу с министром обороны Южного Судана" (Shoigu met with the Minister of Defence of South Sudan), TASS, September 29, 2023, <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/18879397>.

²⁷ "Envoy says South Sudan to strengthen defence capabilities through cooperation with Russia," TASS, November 11, 2023, <https://tass.com/world/1704801>.

²⁸ Current Time, "Доклад: Россия тайно экспортирует оружие в Южный Судан в обход санкций ООН" (Report: Russia secretly exports weapons to South Sudan in circumvention of UN sanctions), February 16, 2023, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/rossiya-tayno-eksportiruet-oruzhie-v-yuzhnyy-sudan/32273947.html>.

²⁹ Amnesty International, *The state of the world's human rights*, (London: April 2025), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/south-sudan/>.

³⁰ "South Sudan's First Family Secretly Amassed Sprawling Corporate Kingdom," *The Sentry*, November 19, 2024, <https://thesentry.org/2024/11/19/80653/south-sudans-first-family-secretly-amassed-sprawling-corporate-kingdom/>.

³¹ Human Rights Watch, "South Sudan: Incendiary Bombs Kill, Burn Civilians," April 9, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/09/south-sudan-incendiary-bombs-kill-burn-civilians?utm_medium=email&utm_source=the-week-in-rights&utm_campaign=2025-04-11.

³² Joshua Craze, "Is this the End of the Peace Process?," *African Arguments*, March 28, 2025, <https://africanarguments.org/2025/03/is-this-the-end-of-the-peace-process/>.

³³ Daniel Garang Deng, "I'm for peace, Kiir tells AU," *The Radio Community*, April 3, 2025, <https://theradiocommunity.org/im-for-peace-kiir-tells-au-4190>.

³⁴ According to UNHCR data, a notable increase of South Sudanese nationals has recently been recorded in countries of departure to the EU such as Libya and Egypt.

³⁵ Annette Weber, "A Region in Spiral, a World in Tumult," interview by Alan Boswell, *The Horn* (International Crisis Group podcast), April 10, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/region-spiral-world-tumult>.



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