Sudan as a Country at Risk of Fragmentation

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Analysis

As a result of the expansionist policies pursued throughout the nineteenth century by Mehmed Ali Pasha, the Ottoman governor of Egypt, and his dynasty toward East Africa, the Sudanese territory was brought together into a single political and administrative unit. This territory was subsequently governed within a unified political–administrative framework for nearly two centuries, encompassing the period of British colonial rule (1898–1956) as well as the post-independence nation-state era. Nevertheless, despite the passage of considerable time, this political and administrative unity did not translate into lasting geographical integration or social cohesion. On the contrary, disconnections among the country's diverse regions and deep-seated social cleavages generated structural problems within the framework of center–periphery relations. These structural problems manifested themselves through unconstitutional revolutionary processes (1964, 1985, 2019), military coups (1958, 1969, 1989), and protracted civil wars (South Sudan and Darfur), ultimately rendering the state structure increasingly fragile over time. The most tangible outcome of this process was the declaration of South Sudan as an independent state in 2011. Furthermore, under the influence of the post-2010 Arab Spring wave, mass protests that intensified in Sudan between 2013 and 2019 led to the collapse of the Omar al-Bashir regime (1989–2019), which had remained in power for three decades, plunging the country into a profound and multilayered period of political uncertainty. In the continuation of this process, Sudan—engaged in nation-state building efforts since 1956—has reached the brink of disintegration as a result of a hybrid civil war that erupted on 15 April 2023 and has been fueled by external interventions.

When the current crisis in Sudan is examined within the framework of the approaches developed by political scientist Jieli Li in the field of state theories, the concepts of state fragmentation and the territorial power of the state provide a strong conceptual basis for analyzing the dynamics, evolution, and potential outcomes of the ongoing civil war. State fragmenta-

tion refers to the process whereby a state's central authority weakens and, as a result, partially or completely loses its sovereignty over the territories it controls. This process denotes the formal (de jure) or de facto division of an existing state into at least two separate political entities. The territorial power of the state, by contrast, denotes a state's capacity to establish and sustain sovereign authority over a defined geographical area. This capacity encompasses not only physical control over territory but also political, legal, and administrative control over the population residing within that territory. In this context, the weakening of the state's territorial power signifies the erosion of its ability to establish effective and legitimate authority within defined geographical boundaries. In the case of Sudan, this erosion has manifested itself through the emergence of alternative spheres of sovereignty created by armed actors and local power centers amid the civil war, drawing the country into a structural crisis that is advancing toward state fragmentation.

Jieli Li emphasizes that processes of state fragmentation and the weakening of territorial power typically emerge in contexts where ruling elites are displaced as a result of unconstitutional and revolutionary political ruptures. In such contexts, disputes among groups that exercise—or seek to exercise—effective control over the state are resolved not through institutional and legal mechanisms, but through unlawful and coercive means. This process deepens ideological, ethnic, religious, and economically based polarizations among groups, thereby generating multilayered and mutually reinforcing structural weaknesses within the state apparatus. Moreover, external interventions further complicate and render this fragile process increasingly unmanageable, significantly heightening the likelihood of state fragmentation and the erosion of territorial power. In the Sudanese case, following the unconstitutional regime change in 2019, polarization among elite groups intensified markedly, while external interventions by regional actors—most notably the United Arab Emirates—accelerated the transformation of this process into armed conflict. The re-

sulting war environment has, in turn, led to a severe erosion of the state's territorial sovereignty capacity.

Even prior to the unconstitutional regime change of 2019, certain regions of Sudan had already fallen noticeably outside the state's territorial power. In particular, South Kordofan and Darfur stood out as areas in which the central authority struggled to establish effective and sustainable control. These regions were under the control of various armed rebel groups. Aware of this structural weakness, the Bashir regime sought to compensate for the erosion of state authority and to prevent further dissolution of central sovereignty by relying on paramilitary structures such as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to maintain control. However, this strategy generated serious reactions both among elite cadres within the state apparatus and among opposition political and social groups. Following the regime change, these tensions culminated in full-scale civil war as the power struggle between rival political and military actors seeking to control Sudan escalated into armed confrontation. At this stage, the weakening of the state's territorial power ceased to be a limited loss of authority confined to specific regions and instead pushed Sudan into a structural crisis advancing toward state fragmentation. In this context, both the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the RSF have sought to establish de facto control over the entire country or over specific territorial areas, demonstrating a tendency to develop alternative sovereignty practices and to institutionalize their own military, administrative, and economic structures within the territories under their control.

At the current juncture, while the SAF—representing the central government—has adopted a military-centric strategy aimed at reclaiming areas beyond its control, the RSF paradoxically employs both secessionist rhetoric and arguments claiming to defend national unity. This dual discourse reflects the RSF's strategic ambiguity in its pursuit of political legitimacy. Although the RSF has established de facto control over large swathes of Sudanese territory, it lacks the capacity to substitute a fully institutionalized and functioning political order in terms of governance and administration. Nevertheless, encouraged and supported by the United Arab Emirates, the RSF leadership has taken steps toward establishing semi-autonomous or independent administrative structures in certain regions, particularly in Darfur. This trajectory risks transforming state fragmentation from a potential threat into a tangible reality. By contrast, the SAF, operating from the premise that it is the sole legitimate representative of the state, has adopted the restoration of territorial integrity as its primary objective. In this regard, the SAF frames its armed struggle within the discourse of "state reconstruction" and the "reestablishment of constitutional order," grounded in the principles of state sovereignty and territorial unity.

In conclusion, when the ongoing war in Sudan is assessed through the conceptual lenses of state fragmentation and the territorial power of the state, it becomes evident that the country has reached the threshold of disintegration. Reversing this process appears possible not merely through the military termination of the conflict, but also through the reestablishment, institutional centralization, and sustainable strengthening of the state's territorial power. Otherwise, Sudan's future risks evolving into a de facto division characterized by territorial fragmentation among regional and local power centers, further deepened by external interventions. Countries such as Somalia, Libya, and Yemen have already experienced similar processes; however, each occupies a different stage and degree with regard to state fragmentation and the erosion of territorial sovereignty.