

The Unseen War: How Drone Proliferation is Reshaping Conflict in Sudan

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ABSTRACT

Four years into Sudan's civil war, global attention has faded even as the conflict itself becomes more dangerous and complex. A conflict one can describe as another forgotten conflicts of the world even though its having a devastating consequences on the lives and livelihood of ordinary Sudanese. This article explores how the growing use of armed drones by both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) is quietly transforming the war. What once involved frontlines and identifiable battle zones has shifted into something more diffuse and unpredictable, where violence can strike far from the battlefield. Drawing on data from the United Nations, ACLED, and UNICEF, the analysis shows that nearly 700 civilians were killed in drone strikes in just the first three months of 2026. Children have been especially affected, making up a striking proportion of casualties. Sudan's war is not only a humanitarian crisis but a glimpse into the future of conflict, where cheap and accessible technologies turn war zones into testing grounds with few rules and even less accountability.

Keywords: Sudan conflict, drone warfare, international humanitarian law, proxy war; armed drones; regulatory gaps.

INTRODUCTION

As the Sudan war continues, but much of the world has stopped paying attention. Headlines, when and if they appear, tend to focus on displacement and humanitarian need while indeed such are critical, they obscure a quieter but equally important shift, the rapid introduction of drones. Drones are now central to that shift as their growing presence marks more than a tactical adjustment; it signals a deeper transformation in warfare itself. The ability to strike remotely, cheaply, and often anonymously is reshaping not only military strategy but also the risks faced by civilians.

This article argues that the spread of drone technology in Sudan has made violence easier to carry out, erased the line between battlefield and civilian life, and exposed serious weaknesses in international law. In doing so, it has turned Sudan into an unregulated testing ground for modern warfare.

The Transformation

The increasing use of drones by both the SAF and RSF has reshaped how this war unfolds on the ground. The SAF has deployed systems such as the Iranian Mohajer-6 and Turkish Bayraktar TB2, while the RSF has relied on commercially available drones and improvised loitering munitions. These tools have made traditional military movements far more dangerous. Large convoys are now easy targets, pushing both sides to spread out, hide within cities, and adopt more irregular tactics. The result is a battlefield that no longer has clear edges. For civilians, this creates a constant sense of vulnerability. Nowhere feels fully safe, and the psychological impact is as significant as the physical destruction.

Humanitarian Consequences

Behind these technological shifts are real human lives, even though many claim that drone strikes can be precise and therefore less harmful to civilians. The evidence from Sudan refutes this spectacularly as the numbers are stark and nearly 700 civilians killed by drone strikes in the first few months of 2026 alone, and over 1,000 in the previous year. Yet even these figures likely fall short, as Sudan's collapsing health system makes accurate reporting difficult. Children are paying an especially heavy price as UNICEF reports show that drone attacks account for the majority of child casualties, with many killed or permanently injured in just a few months. These are not abstract statistics, they represent families disrupted, futures erased, and communities living in constant fear.

What is perhaps most troubling is how routine this has become. In regions like Darfur and Kordofan, near-daily drone strikes have normalized a level of violence that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago, begging the question, could the international community do better to prevent such atrocities?

Internationalization and Proxy Dynamics

One cannot discuss the war by just limiting it to an internal power struggle between the armed faction while ignoring the role of regional and global actors. Countries such as Iran, the UAE, and Egypt, along with global powers like Russia and China, have all been linked to various forms of support to the warring parties and drones make such support and involvement easier as they are relatively cheap, widely available, and allow such external actors to shape the conflict without direct engagement by providing at arms-length, reducing political risk while still influencing outcomes.

Legal and Regulatory Gaps

One of the most alarming aspects of this situation is how poorly it is governed. Existing international laws have not kept pace with the rapid spread of drone technology. The UN arms embargo on Darfur is limited in scope and frequently violated, and it does not even cover the entire country. More importantly, drones themselves fall into a gray area. There is no comprehensive, binding framework that regulates their transfer or use in civil conflicts. This leaves significant room for abuse resulting in a legal vacuum. Given armed groups' opportunity to deploy these weapons with little fear of consequences, and external actors can supply them without clear accountability. For civilians, this means living in a space where protection exists more in theory than in practice.

Implications for Future Conflict

For those of us studying international security, the dynamics observed in Sudan are not anomalous but indicative of broader trends in contemporary warfare. As drone technology becomes cheaper and easier to access, more actors state and non-state alike are likely to adopt it. This evolution points toward a future characterized by more remote, fragmented, and technologically mediated conflicts, in which traditional mechanisms of regulation and accountability struggle to keep pace.

Policy Recommendations

The international community must live up to its roles and responsibilities. The UN Security Council must enforce the existing arms embargo and expand it to cover all of Sudan, with specific provisions for drones and a binding framework should be negotiated among states for the use of autonomous and remotely piloted weapons, closing the legal gaps that enable evasion of responsibility. Such a framework should include mandatory end-user certificates, real-time tracking of drone shipments, and criminal penalties such as sanctions for violations.

Finally, as the war in Sudan ravages humanitarian responses and a mediated solution must be on the horizon, the Sudanese people, who have endured over 33,000 recorded deaths and the displacement of more than 14 million, deserve a coordinated multilateral effort to impose a ceasefire and hold war criminals accountable.

CONCLUSION

Sudan's war may feel distant, but it is shaping something much larger than itself. The weapons being used, and the gaps that allow their use, are defining the future of conflict. Whether the international community chooses to act or continues to look away will not only affect Sudan. It will help determine what kind of wars are fought in the years to come.

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