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CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN TIMES OF POLYCRISIS: ACTORS IN THE GREATER HORN OF AFRICA CONFLICT SYSTEM

The Greater Horn of Africa region faces a complex web of interconnected conflicts. The theatres of violence seem to have been expanding, and a polycrisis is in the making, with opportunistic non-State actors compounding interlinked crises of refugees, displacement, hunger, and climate change, and deepening geopolitical tensions.

The greater Horn is today, arguably, in its most conflictual era in forty years. The most volatile in decades, this volatility is driven by a multitude of factors, including territorial disputes between states, adverse influences by extra-regional powers with interests in rare earth minerals and other valuable raw materials, accompanying transactional engagements by middle and big powers, tribal and ethnic tensions, climate change, and compounded by governance-democracy-security deficits.

A polycrisis in the making, spoilers such as Al-Shabaab, March 23 (M23), the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and work of the African Union (AU), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), East African Community (EAC) and other multi-lateral and regional institutions difficult, but they have also worsened the conflicts and severely destabilised the region.

The Greater Horn region

Encompassing Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, and the outliers – the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Burundi – the region faces a complex web of interconnected conflicts. Some of these conflicts are interlinked, driven by a multiplicity of equally interconnecting reasons for their being – political, economic, ethnic, climate, and massive infiltration by extra-regional actors. In most cases, it is impossible to address one set of conflicts without addressing the larger dynamics within the Horn and Greater Lakes conflict system. Increasingly locked in a web of conflicts now spanning the Southern African state of Mozambique, the theatres of violence seem to have been expanding, and a polycrisis is in the making.

While leading institutions, countries, and players such as the AU, IGAD, SADC, Kenya, and Ethiopia have played leading roles in helping mitigate conflicts in the region (Dizolele et al, 2025), non-state actors such as Oromo Liberation Movement (OLM), Fano (ethno-nationalist Amhara militia), Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), M23, Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and the more ideologically leaning groups such as Al-Shabaab, ISIS, Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), and others, continue to fan the storms of violence in the region.

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Extra-regional powers active in the region include the USA, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, France, China, Turkey, Egypt, and others – all pursuing their national interests, some worsening the conflicts. USA, in particular under the Trump presidency, is seen more as a transnational actor, eyeing short-term gains on minerals from the rich central Africa region over long-term genuine peace and development goals for the countries his administration is involved with.

Inter-country rivalries, particularly Ethiopia-Eritrea, Somalia-Ethiopia, and DRC--Rwanda complicate the resolution of regional conflicts. The breakaway self--declared republic of Somaliland signed a deal with Ethiopia for the latter to access Red Sea port, which has led to rising tensions between Somalia and Ethiopia, with Egypt (Kurtz et al, 2024) and Eritrea (Brookings, 2025) seeing the conflict as a chance to gaining entry, and reason to intervene, and thus pursuing their geopolitical and economic interests in the region by exploiting those fissures.

Sudan

What has been a deeply conflictual State, beginning with a long-running war of independence for South Sudan, then an outbreak of civil war in Darfur, Sudan is now embroiled in the most debilitating internal conflict ever seen in its history since independence. Now a scene of the world's largest displacement, the conflict has displaced close to 15 million Sudanese, with close to 11 million internally displaced, and a further 4 million as refugees (WHO, 2025). The RSF and SAF are locked in a never-ending battle for supremacy, threatening to tear the country further, with extra-regional powers taking sides in the conflict (ICG, 2024).

Somalia

While severe conflicts and tensions exist between states in the Horn, the opportunistic non-State actors have compounded the polycrisis of refugees, displacement, hunger, and climate change, all wrapped into one, to deepen geopolitical tensions, now expanding into the larger Sahel and Middle East Conflict systems, and emerging resource

FIGURE 1. CONFLICT ACTORS IN SUDAN (2025)

Source: Elaborated by the author.

KEY

- Primary Actors
- Secondary Actors
- Tertiary Actors
- Neutral Actors

- Belligerents
- Comrades/Allies
- Neutral
- Proxy conflicts

KEY NOTES

Egypt – Ethiopia: Tensions over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) remain a background factor.

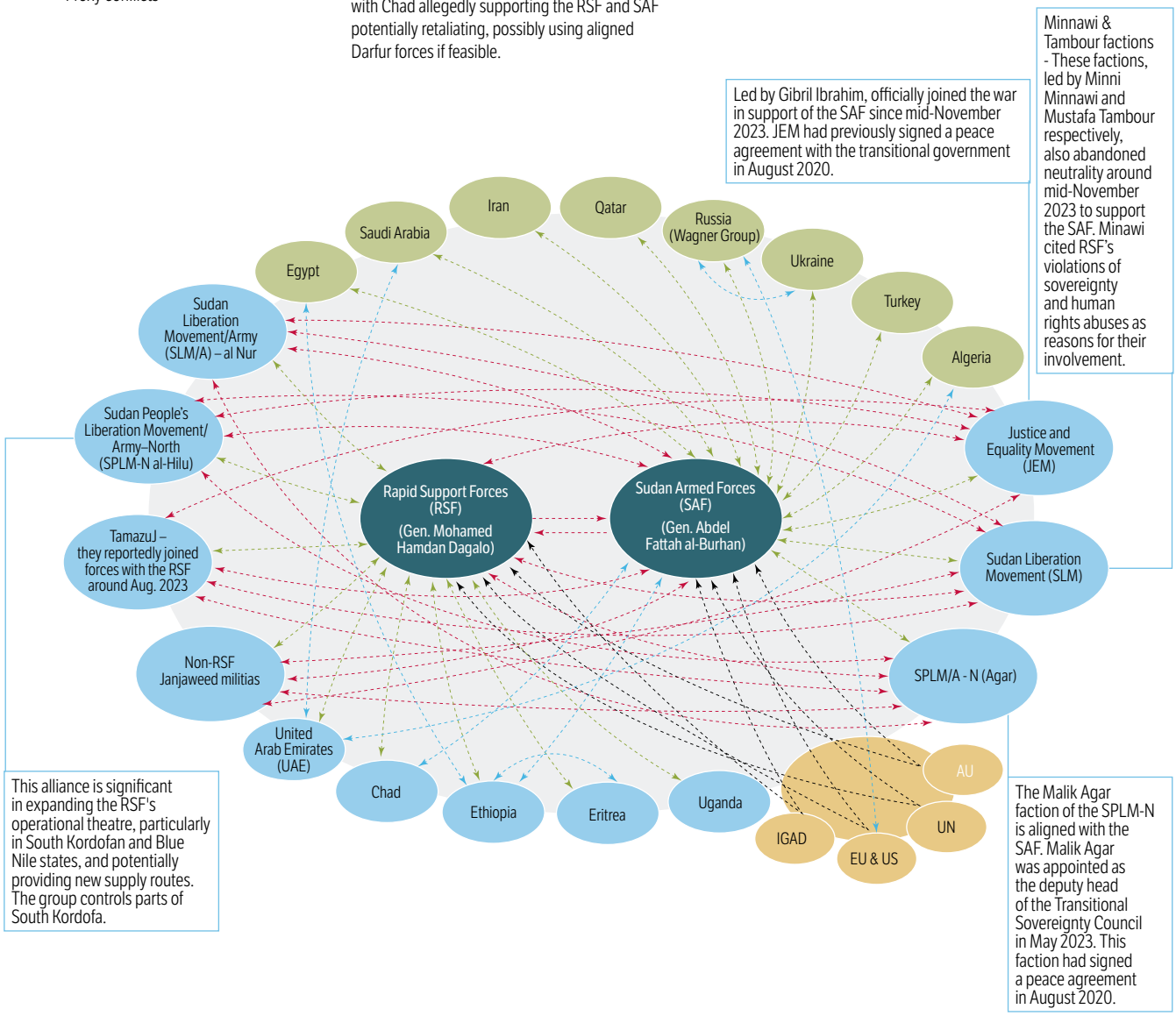
UAE – Saudi Arabia: These Gulf powers back opposing sides in Sudan, reflecting broader regional competition.

Ethiopia – Sudan: Border disputes and refugee flows are ongoing issues.
The RSF's alliance with SPLM-N al-Hilu near the Ethiopian border adds another layer.

Chad – Sudan: There is a long history of proxy wars between Chad and Sudan. The current conflict risks reigniting this, with Chad allegedly supporting the RSF and SAF potentially retaliating, possibly using aligned Darfur forces if feasible.

A major development is the SAF's recapture of Khartoum in March 2025, including the Presidential Palace and key government buildings. This marked a strategic and symbolic victory for the SAF, forcing the RSF to retreat from the capital, though the RSF termed it a "tactical decision" and vowed to return.

Despite setbacks in Khartoum, the RSF continues to dominate large areas, particularly in Darfur and parts of Kordofan. The RSF, along with allied political and armed groups, signed a charter in February 2025 aiming to consolidate control over these territories, raising concerns about a de facto partition of the country.



disputes in the Red Sea basin. An insurgent group that has deployed numerous acts of terror, Al-Shabaab, continues to consolidate its positions around South and Central Somalia, thus increasing its legitimacy in the face of a weakened state. It has used various methods, including a combination of acts of terror, humanitarian service, and offering judicial services to intimidate and enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of the Somali public (Kurtzer et al, 2022).

Ethiopia

Tribal tensions pitting Amhara, Afar, Oromo, and Tigray defy the Ethiopian government's attempts to neutralise such conflicts, threatening further disintegration, thus complicating the climate-induced conflict and famine further. The seat of Africa's premier institution – the African Union, Addis Ababa, is grappling with a major polycrisis, in which its arch enemy, Eritrea, poised to exploit for its strategic interests.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Rooted in decades-old perennial conflict over the control of gold, coltan, and cobalt, amongst many riches, the mineral-rich Democratic Republic of Congo has been thrown into perpetual humanitarian crisis since its independence. Most recent severe war with the March 23 (M23) movement has resulted in about 9 million refugees and internally displaced in the latest violent vortex (UNHCR, 2025). The United Nations Peacekeeping Mission

FIGURE 2. CONFLICT ACTORS IN SOMALIA (2025)

Source: Elaborated by the author.

KEY

- Primary Actors
- Secondary Actors
- Tertiary Actors
- Belligerents
- Comrades/Allies
- Proxy conflicts

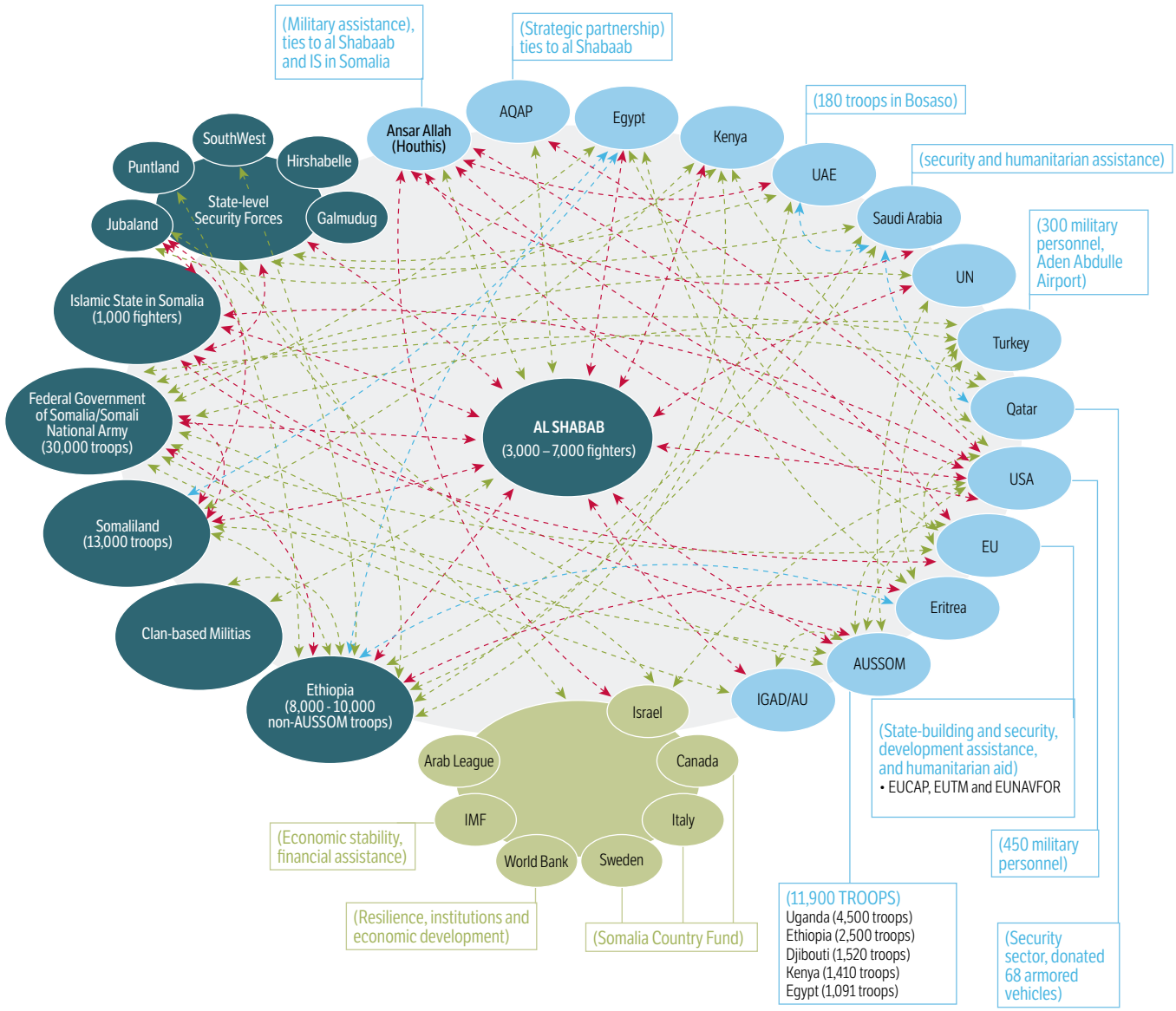
MAIN AREAS OF OPERATION

Al-Shabaab – Southern and central Somalia, increasing activity near Mogadishu, Shabelle regions

Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and Allied Forces – Parts of central Somalia, Mogadishu, conducting operations in Hirshabelle, South-West, and Galmudug

Federal Member State Forces (e.g., Puntland Security Force, Jubaland forces) – Respective Federal Member States (Puntland, Galmudug, Hirshabelle, South-West, Jubaland)

Islamic State in Somalia (ISS) – Golis Mountains, Bari region, Puntland



in the DRC (MONUSCO) has been unable to pacify the nation. The United States under Donald Trump and Qatar have established a two-track conflict resolution process, between DRC and Qatar (the Washington DC process) and between DRC and the M23 rebel group (the Doha process). Both are likely to yield short-term results, but long-term peace and development are unlikely if the processes remain externally-driven and transactional (read mineral exploitation), as is the case with the Washington DC process.

Conclusions

At a time of massive global geopolitical disruptions, and where multilateralism continues to be undermined, and even rejected, as a credible and inclusive platform to negotiate peace and end conflicts, countries in the greater Horn of Africa will have to rethink on how to sustainably end the conflicts and develop their countries. Leaders and policy-makers in the region are advised go back to the drawing boards to redesign and deploy locally-led initiatives that take into account local resources and conditions that produce those conflicts, while limiting external interference. The emerging polycrisis threatens to dwindle the region's quest for long-term peace, if urgent locally-driven solutions are not found. ●

FIGURE 3. CONFLICT ACTORS IN DRC (2025)

Source: Elaborated by the author.

KEY

- Primary Actors
- Secondary Actors
- Tertiary Actors

- Belligerents
- Comrades/Allies
- Neutral
- Proxy conflicts

KEY NOTES

Burundi: Have 1000+ troops in the country under an independent bilateral agreement with DRC. The troops combat the Red-Tabara rebel group and prevent M23 advancements.

Uganda: Have 3000+ troops in the country deployed under Operation Shujaa, a joint mission with FARDC aimed at combating the Islamic State-linked ADF.

EAC: Deployed troops under the EACRF but was criticized owing toits restricted mandate which did not adopt an offensive approach towards M23, and had to withdraw.

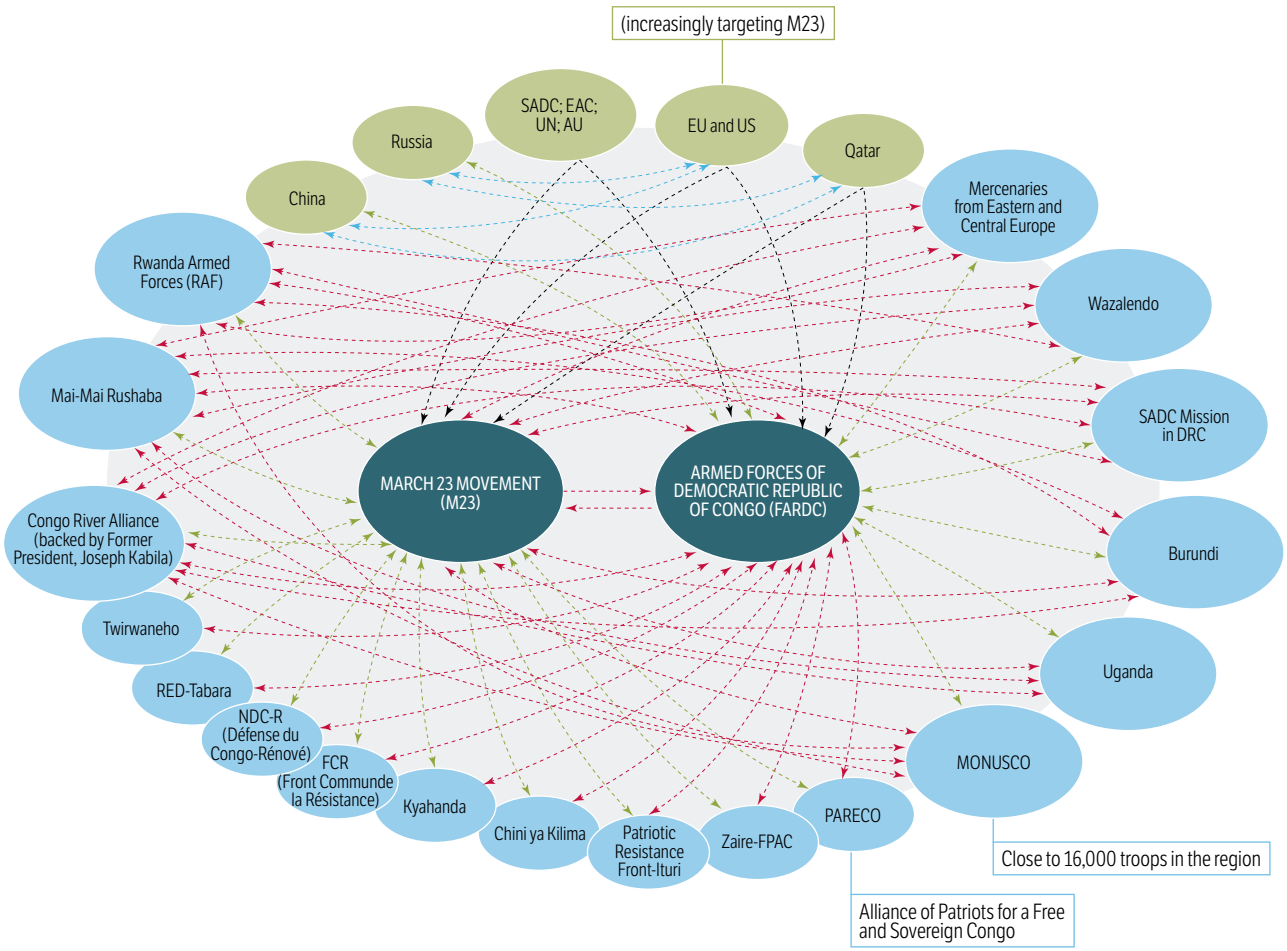
Qatar has been hosting M23 and a high-level DRC delegation for negotiations.

China vs US

- Competition over strategic minerals, especially cobalt and lithium.
- US investment in "friend-shoring" minerals via the Minerals for Security Partnership (MSP), involving DRC.
- China controls 60–70% of DRC's mining rights.

Russia vs US

- Russia seeks influence via military cooperation and the Wagner-approach.
- The US pushes back with sanctions, military aid, and strategic partnerships.



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