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Tracing the Weaponisation of Humanitarian Aid: the UAE's Role in Sudan's Civil War

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Introduction

While the world focuses on conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, Sudan is experiencing what can possibly be described as the worst humanitarian crisis in history. Since the outbreak of fighting in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the conflict has only escalated. According to the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan, the conflict has now entered its third year, marked by intensified fighting, widespread human rights violations, and the increasing involvement of foreign actors (OHCHR, 2025). As of mid-2025, more than 13 million Sudanese have been forcibly displaced, including millions who have fled across borders into Chad, South Sudan, and Egypt (OHCHR, 2025). Earlier assessments already warned that nearly half of Sudan's population faced catastrophic food insecurity, with children disproportionately affected (Goldhagen et al., 2024). The situation has since deteriorated further as humanitarian access has been restricted, aid convoys attacked, and famine conditions deepened, particularly in Darfur (OHCHR, 2025).

Beyond immediate mortality, the indirect effects of the war have profoundly reshaped the social and human security landscape. Widespread sexual violence, forced marriage, trafficking, and the recruitment of children into armed groups have accompanied mass displacement (Goldhagen et al., 2024). Education systems have effectively collapsed in many areas, as schools are destroyed or repurposed as shelters for internally displaced populations. Despite the visibility of this crisis, international political attention and funding have remained limited. Goldhagen et al. (2024) argue that this neglect reflects a broader historical pattern in which humanitarian crises in Africa are overshadowed by conflicts elsewhere, particularly when global geopolitical interests are concentrated outside the continent. Chronic underfunding of humanitarian response efforts has exacerbated the crisis, while billions of dollars are required to meet basic humanitarian needs, only a fraction of requested funding has been delivered (OHCHR, 2025).

Yet, Sudan's conflict is more than a humanitarian emergency, it is also an example of how humanitarian aid can be weaponised within civil war dynamics (Hempton, 2023). The conflict has rapidly evolved into a regionalised security crisis involving neighbouring states and external powers operating through indirect and deniable forms of engagement (Okwany and Hansen, 2023). This research focuses on the alleged weaponisation of humanitarian aid within this conflict, with particular attention to claims that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has utilised

humanitarian operations in eastern Chad to facilitate military support for the RSF.

Research question

This research will be guided by the following primary research question:

How is humanitarian aid weaponised as a strategic tool in the current civil war in Sudan, and to what extent does the UAE's humanitarian presence in Chad facilitate military support for the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)?

This research question is deliberately framed to be analytical rather than accusatory. It is important to note that it does not seek to establish legal culpability. Rather, it will focus on observing whether the patterns and sequence of events can suggest that humanitarian operations have functioned as part of a broader military scheme.

The focus on "to what extent" reflects an awareness of the hidden and indirect forms of involvement that characterise contemporary proxy conflicts. This focus allows for in-depth qualitative analysis while situating the Sudanese case within broader debates on the weaponisation of non-military tools in international security.

Literature review

Humanitarian principles

Humanitarian action is traditionally governed by the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Barnett and Weiss, 2008). These principles are intended to preserve humanitarian space, the operational environment in which aid actors can deliver assistance without being drawn into political or military agendas (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010). In theory, neutrality allows humanitarian organisations to maintain trust among different actors and secure access to affected populations (Osman, 2024). However, critical scholars have increasingly questioned whether this is achievable, can humanitarian space really exist in highly militarised conflicts? In today's conflicts unfortunately we can see that this is not achieved, humanitarian aid access relies on negotiation with armed actors as well as state or foreign donor

fundings (Ziadah, 2019). As a result, humanitarian action is rarely separated from broader political dynamics (Ziadah, 2019). Therefore, if humanitarian aid is never fully neutral in practice, then it becomes analytically plausible to examine how aid may be deliberately instrumentalised by powerful actors (Goldhagen et al, 2024).

Grapengiesser (2024), conceptualises humanitarian space as an abstract but contested domain shaped by asymmetric power relations between humanitarian actors and political authorities. This understanding is particularly relevant in Sudan, where state institutions have largely collapsed, armed actors control territory, and external powers play an increasingly prominent role (Ziadah, 2019). In such contexts, humanitarian space is not only fragile but highly vulnerable to politicisation and instrumentalization (Grapengiesser, 2024). In Sudan these prolonged conflict and widespread humanitarian dependence have created conditions in which the politicisation of aid is highly relevant.

Politicisation of Humanitarian Aid

The Sudanese conflict exemplifies broader transformations in the nature of warfare, in which external actors increasingly rely on indirect intervention to influence conflict outcomes (Okwany and Hansen, 2023). Contemporary civil wars are rarely only fought within national borders but rather are fuelled by transnational networks of diplomacy and humanitarian activity (Okwany and Hansen, 2023). As such, the boundary between civilian and military domains has become increasingly blurred (Humanitarian Aid as a Weapon of War, 2019).

In addition, if humanitarian infrastructure is used for strategic purposes, this raises serious concerns about the loss of humanitarian neutrality and the increasing use of aid for political or military ends (Abeytia et al., 2023). Humanitarian hospitals, air corridors, and logistics networks are afforded protection under international humanitarian law precisely because of their civilian and non-combatant status (Abeytia et al., 2023). If such infrastructure is repurposed, directly or indirectly, to enable military advantage, this undermines both the principle of neutrality and the safety of humanitarian actors (Abeytia et al., 2023). The implications extend beyond Sudan, threatening the integrity of humanitarian action in conflict zones globally. While existing literature has extensively examined aid diversion by armed groups and the challenges of maintaining humanitarian neutrality (Abeytia et al., 2023). Less attention has been paid to the potential for state-led weaponisation of humanitarian operations as part of proxy warfare strategies.

Sudan presents a particularly relevant case in this regard due to the scale of humanitarian dependence it is currently facing, the weakness of state institutions, and the strategic importance of cross-border aid routes, especially through Chad (Osman, 2024). Studies of the UAE's role in Yemen and Libya highlight its preference for indirect engagement, reliance on local partners, and use of dual-use infrastructure (Grapengiesser, 2024). However, Sudan remains underexplored within this field, particularly regarding the potential use of humanitarian aid as a strategic asset (Ziadah, 2019). By examining this case, this research aims to make both an empirical and theoretical contribution to the study of the weaponisation of humanitarian aid and external intervention (Ziadah, 2019).

Sudan's Humanitarian Landscape and Structural Vulnerabilities

Sudan represents an extreme case of humanitarian vulnerability. Osman's (2024) analysis of humanitarian aid delivery in Sudan highlights how ongoing conflict, institutional collapse, and fragmentation have severely constrained humanitarian operations. Aid actors face long lasting insecurity, damaged infrastructure, restricted movement, and limited coordination mechanisms. As a result, humanitarian organisations increasingly rely on cross-border operations, particularly through eastern Chad.

Furthermore, Osman (2024) demonstrates that humanitarian aid in Sudan is already deeply politicised, even in the absence of overt militarisation. Access negotiations, reliance on local intermediaries, and donor conditionality shape where aid can be delivered and to whom (Osman, 2024). The erosion of state authority further reduces oversight and accountability, creating an environment in which humanitarian infrastructure operates in close proximity to political and security actors (Osman, 2024). However, humanitarian vulnerability in Sudan cannot be understood in isolation from the wider regional and international dynamics that have shaped the conflict and intensified competition over access and control.

External Intervention and Proxy Warfare

While the conflict in Sudan originated in internal power struggles between the SAF and RSF, Ingman (2024) demonstrates that sustained foreign military, economic, and logistical support has gradually internationalised the conflict, turning it into a proxy war. In addition,

Okwany and Hansen (2023) conceptualise Sudan's ongoing conflict as a case of intertwined domestic fragmentation and international power competition. African conflicts are frequently characterised by multi-layered dynamics involving competing domestic actors alongside a range of external interests (Okwany and Hansen, 2023). Foreign involvement has long been a structural feature of African politics and conflict, with roots in colonial and post-colonial intervention (Okwany and Hansen, 2023). However, contemporary forms of external interference are often indirect and less visible, and this allows them to 'escape' scrutiny and pass under the radar (Okwany and Hansen, 2023). Sudan's strategic location and weak state institutions make it particularly susceptible to such forms of intervention (Okwany and Hansen, 2023). External actors have proved that the conflict in Sudan is much more than a simple battle between two national groups, there are much larger international powers that are fighting through this war. Rather than deploying their troops directly, they are creating political alliances and support local armed groups by proving aid and weapons, this has enabled them to influence the outcome of the war while keeping at a distance to deny all allegations (Okwany and Hansen, 2023). The absence of effective central authority, combined with unstable borders and reliance on external resources, creates an environment in which these interventions are very prone to be happening and be successful (Okwany and Hansen, 2023).

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have shown that they seek to expand their political and economic influence in East Africa and particularly in Sudan (Kabandula and Donelli, 2024). Sudan occupies a pivotal position for gulf states as it is at the crossroad between the red sea trade corridor, the horn of Africa and the Sahel region (Kabandula and Donelli, 2024). This makes Sudan very strategically valuable to control maritime security, migration routes as well as regional military access (Kabandula and Donelli, 2024). As a result, both the UAE and Suadi Arabia have deep interests and engagements in Sudanese political and security structures (Kabandula and Donelli, 2024). The UAE therefore cultivate a close relationship with Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) (Kabandula and Donelli, 2024). While Suadi Arabia aligned more closely with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) (Kabandula and Donelli, 2024). This division, therefore, helps fuel the war as this external support contributes to the increase in rivalry between the two sides, this is what ultimately contributed to the outbreak of the civil war in 2023 (Kabandula and Donelli, 2024).

Scholars have also drawn attention to the role of soft power and narrative control in shaping external involvement in the Sudanese conflict. Abbas (2025) argues that dominant portrayals of the war as a struggle between two Sudanese generals obscure the extent of foreign

influence and disengage the conflict from broader global power shifts. According to this perspective, the United Arab Emirates has leveraged humanitarian diplomacy, media infrastructure, and cultural engagement to project legitimacy while deflecting scrutiny of its alleged involvement in Sudan (Abbas, 2025). This shows how influence is exercised not only through material support, but also through the management of narratives surrounding conflict and humanitarian crisis (Abbas, 2025)

Concepts, variables and indicators

Weaponisation of Humanitarian Aid

The central concept of this study is the weaponisation of humanitarian aid. Building on existing literature, weaponisation is understood as the deliberate use of humanitarian assistance, infrastructure, or presence to influence conflict dynamics in ways that generate military or strategic advantage (Humanitarian aid as a weapon of war, 2019). As Humanitarian Aid as a Weapon of War argues, humanitarian aid can function as a "force multiplier" when it is integrated into broader political or military strategies rather than remaining a purely civilian endeavour (Humanitarian aid as a weapon of war, 2019). Importantly, weaponisation does not necessarily imply the direct transport of weapons or overt military control of aid operations (Ziadah, 2019). Rather, humanitarian aid may be weaponised through more indirect mechanisms, including the manipulation of access, the strategic placement of infrastructure, and the use of humanitarian legitimacy to conceal or facilitate military activities (Grappensigier, 2024).

Dual-use infrastructure

A second key concept is dual-use infrastructure, referring to facilities or systems that serve both civilian and military functions (Ziadah, 2019). Humanitarian infrastructure is particularly vulnerable to dual-use dynamics in conflict zones due to its protected status, logistical capacity, and proximity to areas of strategic importance (Humanitarian Aid as a Weapon of War, 2019). Hospitals, airstrips, and transport corridors are not inherently militarised ((Humanitarian Aid as a Weapon of War, 2019). However, when they operate in these types of environments where there is limited oversight and high strategic competition, they may be repurposed to support military objectives indirectly (Ziadah, 2019).

Critical scholarship on humanitarian logistics has increasingly highlighted the blurred boundary between civilian aid delivery and military power projection. Ziadah (2019) argues that humanitarian infrastructure operates within the same logistical systems that underpin commercial and military operations, rendering it inherently “dual-use” in character. When analysing the UAE’s activities, it can be seen that they are becoming a major actor in humanitarian aid (Ziadah, 2019). However, this is often paired with their gain in military control and where ports and humanitarian facilities sever multiple purposes, these are not distinguished clearly between humanitarian and military resources which enables these actors to circulate what they want (Ziadah, 2019). This was seen by the UAE in Yemen, where humanitarian aid delivery was closely intertwined with military operations and territorial control (Ziadah, 2019). This can provide a critical analytical lens for examining these allegations that humanitarian infrastructure in eastern Chad may function as a dual-use mechanism in the conflict in Sudan, by facilitating military support indirectly while maintaining a humanitarian framing.

Variables

The dependent variable for this research is the weaponisation of humanitarian aid, it is analysed at the degree to which humanitarian infrastructure and logistics contribute to military advantage for the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The independent variables are first, the UAE humanitarian operations in Chad, the establishment of a hospital and air corridor which has associated them with other forms of support. These operations form the core of how humanitarian aid in this context can be seen as a form of dual-use.

The second independent variable is the political and security relations between the UAE, Chad and Sudan. This looks at the more global geopolitical context into which these humanitarian operations are been executed. Sudan’s conflict as discussed is rooted in regional competition for power, making humanitarian activity inseparable from the political dynamics in the region (Okwany and Hansen, 2023). Lastly, the third independent variable of this research is the patterns of military support to the RSF. This looks at the ported arms flows, logistical support, and changes in RSF operational capacity. Evidence for this may be limited, however looking at patterns over time could still provide the research with important contextual information for assessing the different causal links.

Indicators

Given the challenges of researching covert and indirect activities, this study relies on multiple indicators rather than a single form of evidence. Indicators are selected based on their relevance to the hypothesised causal mechanism and their feasibility given available data. These would therefore include, temporal indicator. Looking at the correlations between the timings of the humanitarian operations of the UAE in Chad (establishment of the hospital, initiation of airlifts etc.) and changes in the RSF military capacities or control in territory. It will also be examining the spatial indicators, the geographical overlap between humanitarian infrastructure and known RSF logistical routes or areas of military activity. Lastly, the research will examine the political indicators, by examining the public statements, denials, or inconsistencies in official narratives that suggest that there was differences in the interpretations of humanitarian activities. No single indicator is likely to be decisive in cases involving indirect and deniable forms of intervention (Humanitarian aid as weapon of war, 2019). Instead, the use of process tracing and assessing multiple indicators can provide enough evidence to see a pattern in these events.

Rationale

The selection of these concepts, variables, and indicators is guided by both theoretical relevance and methodological feasibility. By conceptualising weaponisation as an indirect activity, the framework avoids requiring unrealistic standards of proof while remaining analytically rigorous. This approach is particularly suited this specific conflict, where humanitarian dependence, weak governance, and regional power competition intersect. Moreover, the focus on dual-use infrastructure allows the study to contribute to broader international security debates on the blurring of civilian and military spheres.

Research method

This research will use process tracing as its method. Process tracing is a qualitative, analytical method designed to investigate causal mechanisms and trace the processes through which outcomes occur (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). Unlike large quantitative methods that identify

correlations across multiple cases, process tracing focuses on detailed examination of a single case to uncover how and why specific outcomes emerge through particular causal pathways (Bennett and Checkel, 2014). This method is valuable in this case as it does not simply try to determine whether a relationship between two variables does exist or not but also it helps us understand the mechanisms through which one event led to another (Beach, 2016).

The use of process tracing for this research can be justified for a number of reasons. Firstly, the alleged weaponisation of humanitarian aid by the UAE in support of the RSF represents a covert and indirect case. As Beach and Pedersen (2013) argue, process tracing is particularly suited to investigating phenomena characterised by political ambiguity, where actors have strong incentives to conceal their activities. In proxy warfare contexts, external actors deliberately employ strategies of plausible deniability, making their involvement difficult to detect through conventional methods (Mumford, 2013). Therefore, the use of process tracing is suitable as it allows for the reconstruction of the sequences of events and can point out underlying patterns even when direct evidence is limited or deliberately concealed (Beach, 2016). The use of quantitative methods would not be suitable as it would not capture these hidden causal processes, as they rely on observable, measurable variables across multiple cases.

Secondly, the research question demands analysis of causal mechanisms rather than simple correlation. The question asked is not simply whether humanitarian aid has been weaponised, but how this weaponisation occurs and to what extent UAE operations facilitate military support. This, therefore, requires identification and analysis of the intermediate steps, actors, and processes that connect UAE humanitarian operations in Chad to potential military advantages for the RSF. Process tracing is explicitly designed to "open the black box" of causation by tracing the chain of events and decisions that link cause to effect (Beach, 2016).

Process Tracing in Practice

Process tracing operates by identifying and empirically examining the causal mechanisms that link an independent variable to an outcome. In this research, the outcome that is being examined is the weaponisation of humanitarian aid. Where humanitarian infrastructure is used to generate or enable military advantage. The primary independent variable is the UAE's humanitarian operations in Chad, including the establishment of medical facilities, air corridors, and logistical networks proximate to the Sudanese border. Process tracing allows the researcher

to move beyond simply observing that both phenomena exist and instead to trace the specific pathways through which one may lead to the other (Beach, 2016).

This research employs Beach and Pedersen's (2013) theory-testing process tracing. This begins with a hypothesised causal mechanism derived from existing theoretical literature and tests whether empirical evidence supports that mechanism (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). The theoretical framework that humanitarian infrastructure can be weaponised as part of proxy warfare strategies is derived from existing literature on dual-use infrastructure and humanitarian politicisation (Grapengiesser, 2024; Ziadah, 2019). The research will test whether this theoretical mechanism can be found in the case of Sudan.

The analytical process starts by stating the hypothesised causal mechanism in detail, identifying the steps through which UAE humanitarian operations might facilitate military support for the RSF. This includes identifying what observable implications would be present if each step of the mechanism operates (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). Secondly, the evidence collected from diverse sources is evaluated and undergoes tests (hoop test, smoking gun etc.) which evaluated degree to which it confirms or disconfirms the hypothesised mechanism (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). Third, the temporal and spatial patterns within the case are analysed to identify sequences and correlations that may indicate causal relationships (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). Finally, the overall strength of the causal mechanism is evaluated based on the accumulated evidence, with consideration of alternative explanations (Beach and Pedersen, 2013).

Evidence and Data sources

Process tracing requires triangulation of multiple data sources to reconstruct causal processes (Beach & Pedersen, 2012). This research uses several different types of evidence, which each contribute to proving insight into the hypothesis. These include Official documents, including UN reports, humanitarian organization assessments, and government statements etc. These are relevant as they can provide the facts surrounding the humanitarian situation and the presence of different actors in this conflict. Evidence from journalism will be highly relevant in this research as they often can have information, which is not available to academic researchers, these can come from ground reporting from the conflict zone. This research uses investigative journalism as primary evidence that needs to be analysed and compared with other sources to

test for reliability.

Satellite imagery and flight track data can offer crucial evidence in regards to this research. The analysis of the air traffic between the UAE, Chat and Sudan can reveal activities that actors might seek to conceal. These can provide relatively objective pieces of evidence. However, these require careful interpretation and can also be highly confidential and not accessible.

The diversity of sources is essential for process tracing, as no single source type can provide complete evidence of covert causal processes. By integrating evidence from multiple sources, the research can build a complete case even when individual pieces of evidence remain ambiguous or incomplete. This triangulation approach also helps mitigate the limitations and biases inherent in any single source type.

Analytical Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

This research confronts several significant methodological challenges which are inherent to investigating covert activities in conflict zones. The most salient challenge is the unavailability and deliberate concealment of evidence to support this process tracing research. Actors being investigated have very strong incentives to keep all activities hidden and unavailable to the public. This investigation can therefore be limited to what is available and this could potentially restrain this research. To address this challenge, the research will therefore focus on patterns of circumstantial evidence rather than looking into finding direct proof (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). When a multitude of these independent pieces of evidence are put together, they can form patterns that support the hypothesis. This approach applies Bayesian logic, in which multiple weak pieces of evidence accumulate to strengthen an overall conclusion (Beach and Pedersen, 2013).

A second challenge is the ambiguity concerning dual use. It is difficult to distinguish when in conflict is a humanitarian infrastructure is being weaponised or not. A hospital that treats wounded civilians may also treat wounded combatants. The airstrip can deliver humanitarian supplies as easily as it could transport military supplies. By assessing this dual use in this research, it could be hard to identity where does humanitarian relief ends and military support start. In addition, there is the risk of confirmation bias. When investigating allegations of wrongdoing, as a researcher it can be easy to unconsciously interpret some evidence, which may

be ambiguous, in a way which could support their research. To address this possible challenge, would be to have another researcher interpret the data (Befani and Stedman-Bryce).

Process tracing: Analysis of the weaponisation of Humanitarian aid

This chapter applies process tracing to examine whether humanitarian aid has been weaponised in Sudan's current civil war and whether the United Arab Emirates' humanitarian presence in Chad has facilitated military support for the Rapid Support Forces. The purpose of the chapter is not to establish legal culpability, but to assess whether the sequence of events, the spatial distribution of humanitarian infrastructure, and the pattern of public claims and denials are consistent with a broader mechanism of strategic facilitation.

The analysis follows a chronological structure across four distinct phases, starting with the beginning of UAE activity in Chad and ending with observable improvements in RSF military capacity. In each phase, the two main interpretations of these events are compared, the Sudanese Armed Forces' view that UAE activities supported the RSF, and the UAE's claim that its actions were purely humanitarian. To assess the evidence, Beach and Pedersen's (2013) process-tracing framework is being used, including hoop tests, smoking-gun tests, straw-in-the-wind tests, and doubly decisive tests. Triangulation across UN documentation, investigative journalism, flight-tracking telemetry, and official declamations mitigates source-specific biases inherent to proxy conflict dynamics.

Phases	Sudan government claim	UAE claim	Evidence	Test applied	What it confirms	What it rules out
1: UAE Emplacement in Chad	Amdjarass, is being used as a broader support architecture for the RSF (Reuters, 2024)	UAE presence in Amdjarass is purely humanitarian (hospital and aid flights for Sudanese refugees) (UAE Embassy, 2025)	-Report by Reuters: dozens of UAE flights to Amdjarass and said UN experts found the route likely supplied arms to Sudanese rebels (Reuters, 2024). -The New Arab reported a UN document identifying 24 Il-76TD cargo planes landing in Amdjarass in 2024 (The New Arab, 2025)	Hoop test passed for UAE presence in Chad	Sustained UAE logistical presence in eastern Chad. Making dual-use possible.	Weakens idea that Amjadrass was simply a small isolated humanitarian site with no broader function.
2: Logistical entanglement	UAE logistics in Chad were connected to RSF supply corridors across the border	The UAE says the flights and hospital were for civilian and refugees only (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025a).	-Flight patterns show repeated UAE cargo traffic to Amjadarass (Reuters, 2024). -UN reporting and open-source investigations linked these flights to weapons routes into Darfur (Jazeera, 2025). - Conflict Insights Group report later shows a similar pattern of Il-76 flights shifting to Kufra after scrutiny on Amdjarass increased (Conflict Insights Group, 2026).	Hoop test passed for spatial/logistical proximity Straw in the wind for route adaptation	Confirms that UAE-linked activity was not static. Appears to have been embedded in a wider regional logistics network	Pattern looks adaptive and transnational rather than purely relief based. Weakness purely humanitarian interpretation.
3: Dual-use purposes	Humanitarian infrastructure created opportunities for covert military support and	The UAE insists its aid channels were neutral and compliant with humanitarian law (European Centre for	-Refugee International stated that the UAE provided military support under the cover of an Emirates Red Crescent humanitarian mission (Halakhe, 2026). - The Conflict Insights group report	Smoking gun test passed	Confirms that humanitarian-facing or civilian-facing infrastructure may have been used as cover for military	-Weakens the UAE's claim that humanitarian presence was isolated from the conflict.

	diversion.	Counterterrorism and Intelligence Studies, 2025).	show Colonbian mercenaries moving through AUE-linked staging points, including Ghayathi in the UAE, Kufra in Libya, and Nyala in Sudan (Conflict Insights Group, 2026). - Reuters said UN experts found the flights to Amdjarass likely supplied arms (Reuters, 2024)		logistics and personnel movement	-Weakens the argument that all movement was purely civilian -The notion that all criticism rests only on weak or speculative allegations.
4: Material support to the RSF	UAE-linked support helped the RSF sustain operations, capture territory, and intensify atrocities	The UAE denies providing weapons or military support and says criticism is politically motivated (European Centre for Counterterrorism and Intelligence Studies, 2025).	- The Guardian's 2024 report on "smoking gun" evidence, including alleged documentary material submitted to the UN Security Council and Emirati passports found in Sudanese battle contexts (Guardian, 2024). - The Reuters report notes UN experts said UAE-supplied weapons altered the balance of power in Sudan (Reuters, 2024) - The Conflict Insights Group report links UAE-supported mercenaries and drone capabilities to the RSF's capture of El Fasher (Conflict Insights Group, 2026).	Doubly decisive: convergence between multiple independent sources	Confirms a strong pattern of military facilitation, especially through weapons, mercenaries, and drone support	Makes a purely humanitarian explanation difficult to sustain on the balance of evidence.

Table 1: Process Tracing of the weaponisation of humanitarian aid in Sudan

Table 1 outlines the method of process tracing used to examine whether humanitarian operations in eastern Chad formed part of a broader dual-use support structure that facilitated military assistance to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The central analytical question is not whether humanitarian aid existed, because it did, but whether humanitarian infrastructure, mobility, and legitimacy were potentially embedded within a wider strategic environment that produced military advantage.

The causal mechanism developed through this process tracing is divided inte four phases. First, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) established a humanitarian and logistical presence in eastern Chad, centred on Amdjarass. Second, this presence became increasingly enmeshed with cross-border supply routes and other regional logistics networks. Third, the broader structure generated dual-use affordances, meaning that humanitarian-facing infrastructure could also support personnel movement, concealment, or military sustainment. Fourth, these dynamics contributed to RSF operational capacity and battlefield outcomes in Sudan. The analysis below traces each of these steps in turn and assesses the competing UAE and Sudanese narratives against the available evidence.

Phase 1: Humanitarian emplacement in eastern Chad

The first phase concerns the UAE's establishment of humanitarian operations in Amdjarass after the outbreak of war in Sudan. The UAE publicly framed its presence as humanitarian, stressing the role of its field hospital and aid flights for Sudanese refugees and displaced civilians (UAE Embassy, 2025; UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025a). This claim is significant. The UAE is one of the major humanitarian donors to Sudan, and official Emirati

sources have repeatedly emphasised major relief commitments, including further support to UNHCR and large donations for Sudanese humanitarian assistance (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025b). These records of humanitarians assistance makes the case analytically difficult, because the existence of aid is real and must be treated as part of the evidence rather than ignored.

On the other hand, the Sudanese government interpreted the same presence differently, viewing the Amdjarass airstrip as a strategic corridor that could enable support to the RSF (OHCHR, 2025). Flight reporting and open-source investigations showed repeated UAE cargo movements to Amdjarass, confirming a sustained logistical footprint in a location proximate to Darfur (Reuters, 2024). This is important in process-tracing terms because it establishes emplacement: there was a material UAE presence in a border zone with obvious strategic relevance. The evidence as shown on table 1, therefore passes a hoop test for necessary presence, but it does not yet prove diversion or military intent. The humanitarian explanation remains possible, but it is already weakened by the absence of clear independent verification that the operation was exclusively for civilian purpose (Guardian, 2025).

Phase 2: Logistical enmeshment and route adaptation

The second phase explores whether the humanitarian presence in Chad became linked to wider regional logistics, particularly RSF supply corridors. Here the evidence becomes more probative. As shown on table 1, Reuters reported that UN experts believed the Amdjarass route was likely being used to supply arms to Sudanese rebels, while the UAE denied any military role and insisted that its flights were humanitarian (Reuters, 2024). The New Arab reported that a UN document identified 24 Il-76TD cargo aircraft landing in Amdjarass in 2024, reinforcing the view that this was a sustained logistical channel rather than an isolated aid mission (The New Arab, 2025). Repetition is key here, as a single flight could be explained as emergency relief, but an extended pattern of cargo movements raises a stronger inference of embedded logistics.

The Conflict Insights Group report adds in another layer to this phase. It argues that once scrutiny increased around Amdjarass, the wider logistics pattern shifted toward Kufra in Libya, where Il-76 cargo flights increased sharply and the airport was described as an RSF logistics hub (Conflict Insights Group, 2026). The logistics network did not vanish under scrutiny, but rather it appears to have reconstituted itself elsewhere. It does not constitute conclusive proof that the Amdjarass flights contained weapons, but it strongly supports the inference that the

humanitarian presence sat inside a flexible transnational logistics system rather than operating as a discrete relief corridor. Overall, this phase therefore provides stronger evidence of logistical enmeshment. The key analytical point is not simply that flights existed, but that the support structure appears to have been flexible, capable of rerouting activity across different staging points while maintaining continuity in RSF support. This strengthens the inference that the UAE's presence in Chad was part of a wider dual-use logistics system rather than an exclusively humanitarian operation.

Phase 3: Dual-use affordances and military facilitation

The third phase examines whether the broader network created dual-use affordances. This is where the research's central concept of the weaponisation of humanitarian aid becomes most visible. Refugees International's reporting states that the UAE continued to help fuel RSF atrocities while publicly advancing humanitarian framing, thereby combining relief discourse with material support to violence (Halakhe, 2026). This does not merely suggest inconsistency. It suggests the precense of both humanitarian legitimacy and military enabling within the same strategic environment.

The Conflict Insights Group report deepens this point by tracing Colombian mercenaries through UAE-linked staging points, including a UAE military facility in Ghayathi, before onward movement through Kufra and into Sudan, where they appeared in Nyala and El Fasher (Conflict Insights Group, 2026). This is key as it shows that the network moved not only cargo but also trained personnel. The report further links Nyala to RSF drone operations and identifies Colombian mercenary activity in and around the city (Conflict Insights Group, 2026). The implication is that humanitarian infrastructure and regional logistics were embedded in a wider military support chain.

In process-tracing terms,this evidence passes a straw-in-the-wind test and moves toward strong corroboration for the existence of dual-use potential. The evidence does not show that humanitarian activity was itself a military operation. It does, however, show that the humanitarian corridor was embedded in a broader network of movement and access that could be, and likely was, used for purposes beyond relief alone. The argument is not about proving that every flight or facility had military content, but about establishing whether humanitarian infrastructure created enabling conditions for conflict support. On that basis, the evidence substantially weakens the claim that the UAE presence in Chad was wholly separate from the

war.

Phase 4: Material support to the RSF

This final phase provides the strongest convergence in the process-tracing analysis as it links the earlier logistical and personnel evidence to concrete battlefield effects. The critical claim is that UAE-linked support helped the RSF sustain operations, capture territory, and intensify atrocities, whereas the UAE's counter-claim is that it provided no weapons or military support and that allegations against it are politically motivated. The evidence assembled in this phase is therefore not about one isolated shipment or one ambiguous flight. It is about whether multiple independent sources point to the same underlying mechanism of military facilitation.

The Guardian's 2024 reporting is important because it presented what it described as "smoking gun" evidence of UAE involvement in the Sudan war, including material submitted to the UN Security Council and images of Emirati passports allegedly recovered in conflict contexts in Sudan (Guardian, 2024). In process-tracing terms, this is stronger than a straw-in-the-wind or hoop-test item because it speaks to possible direct operational presence, not merely to logistical proximity (Beach and Pedersen,2013). It does not by itself establish legal culpability, but it does provide high-weight corroborative evidence that weakens the UAE's claim of complete non-involvement.

Reuters adds another layer by reporting that UN experts said UAE-supplied weapons altered the balance of power in Sudan, prolonged the war, and increased civilian casualties. That passage is analytically significant because it does not merely allege supply; it links supply to consequences. In process-tracing terms, this functions as strong corroboration of outcome relevance: the alleged material support is associated with observable changes in conflict dynamics, especially RSF resilience and escalation. Reuters also noted repeated UAE flights to an airstrip in Chad that UN experts said supplied arms to Sudanese rebels, which helps connect the material-support claim to the earlier logistical phases of the analysis. The evidentiary value here is cumulative: the airbridge, the weapons allegations, and the conflict effects all reinforce one another rather than standing alone.

The Conflict Insights Group report pushes this even further by connecting UAE-backed mercenaries and drone capability to the RSF's capture of El Fasher. It therefore moves the argument beyond generic military assistance into a much larger scheme with the capability of transfer (Conflict Insights Group, 2026). If mercenaries operated drones, trained fighters, and enabled the assault on El Fasher, then the support was not incidental. This is close to a doubly

decisive pattern because the same evidence both supports the UAE-linked facilitation hypothesis and makes the purely humanitarian explanation difficult to sustain. The inference is not that humanitarian aid was absent, but that humanitarian claims cannot plausibly explain the observed battlefield outcomes on their own.

Phase 4 provides the clearest evidence of material military effect. The Guardian report strengthens direct-facilitation allegations, Reuters supplies corroboration of weapons-linked conflict effects, and the Conflict Insights Group ties those effects to the RSF's territorial gains and drone warfare. Together, these sources pass a strong corroboration standard and, taken cumulatively, approach a doubly decisive test because they support the military-facilitation mechanism while substantially weakening the humanitarian-only explanation. This does not prove every component of the UAE's role beyond doubt, but it does make a purely humanitarian interpretation very difficult to defend on the balance of evidence.

Reflection on the Broader implications of humanitarian weaponisation

The case analysed of the UAE cannot be understood in isolation from the wider ongoing conflict occuring in Sudan. The War is constantly being shaped and redefined by domestic and external actors. The RSF, the SAF, neighbouring states and wider regional powers all have influenced the conflict through military, diplomatic ad logistical means (OHCHR, 2025). The UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan has emphasised that the disintegration of governance, the militarisation of society, and foreign involvement are all worsening the civilian crisis, while reporting that both sides in the conflict have intensified the use of violence and exploited humanitarian conditions (Jazeera, 2025). More recent assessments regarding humanitarian-access, have also shown that aid delivery in Darfur and Kordofan remains constrained by administrative barriers, route closures, and the fragmentation of authority across the multiple armed actors (ACAPS, 2026). This demonstrated that humanitarian aid in Sudan is not operating in a stable neutral environment, but within a fragmented war economy in which access itself is contested and weaponised (Humanitarian aid as a weapon of war, 2019). The evidence examined in the previous section suggests that the UAE's humanitarian footprint in Chad may have intersected with support to the RSF, but it is only one piece in a much larger and

more complex system. The implication is that the weaponisation of humanitarian aid should not be treated as a standalone tactic belonging to one actor alone, but as part of a wider pattern in which humanitarian space itself has become a contested arena of war.

The evidence from Sudan also illustrates how thin the line has become between humanitarian assistance and conflict support. In principle, humanitarian action is governed by the norms of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, but in practice these principles are difficult to sustain in highly militarised environments where aid depends on access negotiations, border routes, and state or donor cooperation (Ziadah, 2019). The case of Sudan reveals how easily humanitarian infrastructure can be drawn into broader logistical systems. Hospitals, air corridors, warehouses, and border crossings are created to protect civilians, yet the same facilities can also be used to move personnel, sustain armed actors, or conceal strategically useful flows of goods (Abeytia et al., 2023). In this sense, humanitarianism and militarisation are not always opposite categories, they can coexist within the same operational space.

This tension is visible in the Emirati case. Official UAE statements present the country as a major humanitarian donor and continue to emphasise aid pledges, support for refugees, and calls for a ceasefire (UAE Embassy, 2025; UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). However, the evidence gathered and presented in the process tracing, points to cargo movements, route adaptation, mercenary transit, and battlefield support that are difficult to reconcile with a purely civilian agenda (Conflict Insights Group, 2026). The result is not simply a contradiction, but a structural ambiguity. It reveals that humanitarian legitimacy can be used to create operational space, and that space can then be captured by a conflict economy. This is why the boundary between helping and fuelling war has become so thin. Humanitarian action may remain genuine in part, however still be embedded in systems that produce military gain.

A major implication of the Sudan case is that current regulatory frameworks are poorly equipped to address indirect and deniable forms of support. Existing humanitarian law is designed primarily to protect civilians and humanitarian actors from direct attack, but it is much less effective at dealing with dual-use logistics, proxy sponsorship, or the strategic use of humanitarian presence by powerful states (Humanitarian Aid as a Weapon of War, 2019). The problem is not merely that rules are absent, but that they are too weak to monitor complex supply chains, border corridors, and state-backed humanitarian diplomacy in real time. The humanitarian-access literature on Sudan shows just how severe this governance gap has become: aid actors face bureaucratic constraints, route insecurity, closure of border crossings, and parallel

regulations imposed by armed actors, all while drone warfare and shifting front lines undermine mobility and verification (ACAPS, 2026). In such conditions, even well-intentioned aid can be folded into political and military strategies.The UAE case reveals exactly that. Their own humanitarian claims, whether through official statements or diplomatic pledges, illustrate the difficulty of distinguishing genuine relief from strategic positioning. The fact that the UAE is simultaneously a major donor, a politically influential Gulf state, and the subject of repeated allegations of military support underlines the regulatory challenge.

Recommendations to ensure civilian security

A first priority is to protect civilians by strengthening humanitarian access in ways that reduce the scope for diversion, militarisation, or political manipulation. The Sudan case shows that aid corridors, airstrips, and cross-border delivery routes can become embedded in wider conflict logistics when oversight is weak and armed actors control territory (Humanitarian Aid as a Weapon of War, 2019; ACAPS, 2026). Humanitarian actors therefore need stronger systems for independent verification, route monitoring, and separation between civilian relief infrastructure and military or security-linked facilities. This is especially urgent in eastern Chad and border areas linked to Darfur, where humanitarian presence can be used legitimately to reach displaced populations but may also create dual-use opportunities if safeguards are absent (Halakhe, 2026).

The U.S. and other donors should also match or exceed 2024 and 2025 levels of support for Sudan and Chad, as the funding gap has left refugees and internally displaced people exposed to food insecurity, gaps in shelter, and inadequate protection services (Halakhe, 2026). Aid should not be reduced in response to misuse risks; rather, it should be protected through better monitoring and clearer operational separation. In practical terms, this means strengthening UNHCR, WFP, OCHA, and NGO capacity to track delivery, verify beneficiaries, and report interference (Halakhe, 2026). It also means supporting humanitarian corridors that are clearly civilian in purpose, with strict reporting obligations and, where possible, third-party observation (Halakhe, 2026).

A second recommendation is to increase pressure on external actors that enable the conflict, including those providing military, financial, or logistical support to the warring parties. The analyses shows that the conflict cannot be understood only through the fighting of the Sudanese nation , because external actors have shaped the war economy through arms transfers,

mercenary recruitment, diplomatic cover, and conflict-linked business networks (Conflict Insights Group, 2026). The UAE case is therefore central here, but the wider lesson is that indirect support networks are now part of the war's infrastructure. The international response should therefore target not only combatants but also the external facilitators, financier and transport networks that sustain them. If this is not addressed than the conflict cannot be resolved.
In addition, public pressure, commercial leverage, and reputational costs can matter when states with significant global economic ties are implicated in conflict dynamics (Reeves, 2025). For the UAE this means building coordinated diplomatic pressure among Western states, Gulf partners, and multilateral institutions so that involvement in Sudan carries real political and economic costs (Reeves, 2025). Silence or inconsistency by major powers weakens deterrence and allows conflict linked support to continue under the cover of legitimate state relations.

Sanctions should be applied more consistently and more strategically. The EU and UK have already expanded measures against senior RSF figures and companies linked to the conflict, including financial and travel restrictions on key individuals and entities (UK Government, 2023). These are important steps, because they show that sanctions can be used not only against armed commanders but also against commercial enablers and the firms that fund war. However, the evidence also suggests that sanctions have been uneven, selective, and sometimes politically constrained. This undermines their effectiveness.

A stronger sanctions strategy should target the full ecosystem of support. Where evidence supports it, sanctions should also be used against external actors that materially assist the conflict, not only the local actors, like it has been shown with the case of Sudan. The British sanctions regime provides a useful model, as it bit explicitly states that humanitarian activity should remain protected even as commercial and military enablers are punished (UK Government, 2023). That balance is essential if sanctions are to reduce violence without worsening the humanitarian crisis.

Furthermore, a priority is to reinforce the existing arms embargo and improve monitoring of dual-use flows, especially drones, armoured vehicles, and cargo routes. The UN Security Council remains the key actor for this, and recent reporting indicates that Council members continue to view the Sudan sanctions regime and arms embargo as highly relevant to the conflict's trajectory (Security Council Report, 2026). Yet the embargo is only as effective as the mechanisms that enforce it. The Sudan war shows that weapons can enter conflict zones through indirect routes, opaque logistics chains, and networks that are difficult to attribute in real time.

The Security Council should therefore strengthen the embargo in three ways. First, it should explicitly address drone technology and aerial platforms, which have become central to the conflict and to RSF and SAF operational capacity (Amani Africa, 2025). Second, it should improve monitoring of cargo aircraft, border crossings, and military-linked transport routes. Third, it should mandate more systematic reporting by states on any transfers that may have dual-use implications. The key point is not simply to punish violations after the fact, but to reduce the room for this support in the first place.

Moreover, accountability must remain part of the response. The Sudan conflict has generated repeated allegations of atrocity crimes, including mass killings, sexual violence, and attacks on civilians, and these require durable investigative and judicial mechanisms.. European states, especially the United Kingdom, should support the renewal of the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan so that evidence can continue to be collected and preserved (Halakhe, 2026). The European Union should also increase technical and financial support to the International Criminal Court (ICC), since legal accountability depends on sustained evidentiary work and political backing (Halakhe, 2026).

In addition, universal jurisdiction should be used more actively. States whose legal systems allow it should investigate commanders, financiers, and brokers who travel abroad or hold assets on their territory (Halakhe, 2026). That includes not only Sudanese combatants but also external facilitators where sufficient level of proof exists. The objective is not to simply symbolically condemn these actors, it is to create consequences for those enabling the war, whether directly or indirectly. This is important because procedural barriers and political pressure can easily stall accountability efforts even when the underlying evidence is strong.

Finally, humanitarian space itself needs stronger protection. The key lesson from this research is that humanitarian aid can no longer be treated as automatically neutral simply because it is labelled humanitarian. In highly fragmented conflicts, humanitarian infrastructure may be used genuinely, but it may also be folded into broader strategic projects. The policy response should therefore focus on transparency, independent verification, and separation of functions rather than on assumptions about intent. This is especially important for state backed humanitarian diplomacy, where donor visibility and conflict influence may overlap.

The example of Sudan suggests the need for a more realistic governance model. One that does not assume humanitarian neutrality as a given, but instead treats it as something that must

be actively protected, monitored, and verified. The goal is not to criminalise aid, but to ensure that aid is not used to launder strategic influence or support violence. This is essential in order to protect the security of the indivudlas who are living in these conflict zones.

Conclusion

This research paper has set out to examine whether humanitarian aid in Sudan's current civil war has been weaponised, and whether the United Arab Emirates' humanitarian presence in Chad formed part of a broader mechanism of strategic facilitation for the Rapid Support Forces. The evidence does not support a simple binary reading in which the UAE was either purely humanitarian or wholly militarised. Instead, the findings show a more complex pattern in which humanitarian assistance, logistical access, diplomatic positioning, and alleged military support became increasingly entangled within the broader conflict economy in Sudan.

The analysis has demonstrated that humanitarian aid in Sudan cannot be understood outside the political and military conditions in which it operates. The UN Fact-Finding Mission and other humanitarian analyses describe a conflict in which both sides have obstructed access, exploited humanitarian conditions, and contributed to the collapse of civilian protection. This matters because it shows that weaponisation is not confined to one actor or one route. Rather, humanitarian space itself has become part of the war's terrain. The UAE case therefore represents one particularly visible node in a wider pattern of conflict manipulation, rather than the whole story on its own.

The process-tracing evidence presented in the paper supports the conclusion that the UAE's humanitarian activity in Chad created a logistical and political environment that was not fully insulated from the conflict. Repeated cargo flights, route adaptation, and the alleged movement of personnel and materiel through regional staging points all strengthened the inference that humanitarian infrastructure may have operated within a dual-use setting. Later evidence linking mercenaries, drone warfare, and battlefield effects to RSF operations further reinforced this interpretation. The result is not conclusive proof that every UAE humanitarian activity was military in nature, but rather a strong cumulative case that humanitarian presence may have facilitated conflict support in ways that were difficult to observe directly.

At the same time, the paper has also shown why the matter remains analytically difficult.

The UAE has provided substantial humanitarian assistance to Sudan since the war began and has consistently framed its position as one of civilian relief, ceasefire advocacy, and political de-escalation. These claims cannot be dismissed out of hand, because they are backed by real aid commitments and official diplomatic messaging. However, the process-tracing analysis indicates that these humanitarian claims do not fully account for the broader pattern of evidence. In that sense, the paper does not argue that humanitarian aid did not exist. Rather, it argues that humanitarian aid may have coexisted with, and potentially obscured, other forms of strategic support.

These findings have contributed to a broader theoretical point about the weaponisation of humanitarian aid. The Sudan case suggests that the boundary between helping civilians and fuelling war is increasingly thin, especially in conflicts where external actors can exploit dual-use infrastructure and weak accountability. Humanitarian action can be indispensable and genuine, yet still be embedded in settings that allow military advantage to be generated indirectly. This is particularly troubling because the very mechanisms designed to save lives, such as airlifts, border access, hospital sites, and donor partnerships have proven to also be a part of the conflict's operational architecture when oversight is weak and political interests are strong.

The research also highlights the limits of current governance and accountability frameworks. The evidence suggests that sanctions, arms embargoes, and legal mechanisms remain too fragmented to address indirect facilitation effectively. Existing rules are better at identifying overt violations than at tracing the movement of dual-use logistics, state-backed humanitarian diplomacy, or covert external support. The need, therefore, is not only for more humanitarian funding, but for better monitoring, transparency, and enforcement. In particular, humanitarian corridors and state-linked aid operations require stronger verification, while arms embargoes need to be adapted to the growing importance of drones, cargo aircraft, and other forms of aerial mobility.

Overall, Sudan shows that protecting civilians in the context of humanitarian aid requires more than delivering assistance. It requires controlling the conditions under which aid is moved, who benefits from it, and whether it can be folded into military logistics. The policy response must therefore combine humanitarian funding, sanctions, embargo enforcement, legal accountability, and stronger oversight of dual-use routes. Just as importantly, it must recognise that the war is not driven by one actor alone. The most effective strategy is one that addresses the broader network of enablers while preserving the aid for civilians who depend on it.

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WORD COUNT: 9848

ANNEX: Declaration of Use of Generative AI Tools

Academic Year: 2025/2026
Master's Programme: Master in International Security Management (MISM)
Student Name: Garance Rerolle

I declare that generative artificial intelligence tools have been used as support tools in the preparation of this Master's Final Thesis.

✓ YES ☐ NO

1. Ethical and Academic Use

Have you included sensitive or personal data when using AI tools? If yes, specify:

NO

Have you used AI tools to replace your own work without critically reviewing the generated content? If yes, specify:

NO

Have you followed the academic recommendations and guidelines regarding the use of AI tools?

YES

2. Technical Use of AI Tools

Please indicate the AI tools used (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot, Claude, Gemini):

Perplexity

Please mark the applicable uses:

- ✓ Text generation
- ✓ Reformulation / editing
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- ✓ Structure suggestions
- Methodological support
- ✓ Bibliographic search or citation support
- Audiovisual content generation
- Other uses (please specify)

I confirm that the final content of this thesis has been fully reviewed, corrected, and validated by me as the author. The use of AI has not replaced my own critical analysis, personal reflection, or intellectual work.

Signature: