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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, 2024). 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 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, understood as 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 enables humanitarian organisations to maintain trust among conflicting parties and secure access to affected populations (Osman, 2024). However, a growing body of critical scholars questions whether such neutrality is achievable in contemporary conflict settings, particularly in highly militarised environments. 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).

This tension is captured in Grapengiesser's (2024) conceptualisation of humanitarian space as an abstract yet contested domain shaped by asymmetric power relations between humanitarian

organisations and political authorities. Rather than a fixed or protected sphere, humanitarian space is continuously negotiated and redefined within political contexts. This perspective is particularly relevant in conflict settings where state authority is weakened or fragmented, raising the question of how humanitarian action operates when political and military structures dominate the environment in which aid is delivered (Ziadah, 2019). In such contexts, humanitarian space is not only fragile but highly vulnerable to politicisation and instrumentalisation (Grapengiesser, 2024).

These dynamics are especially visible in contemporary forms of warfare, where the boundaries between civilian and military domains have become increasingly blurred. As Okwany and Hansen (2023) argue, modern conflicts are rarely confined within national borders but are embedded in transnational networks of diplomacy, security, and humanitarian activity. Within these settings, humanitarian infrastructure itself can become entangled in strategic considerations. Facilities such as hospitals, air corridors, and logistics networks are protected under international humanitarian law due to their civilian status (Abeytia et al., 2023). However, if such infrastructure is used, directly or indirectly, to support military objectives, this undermines the principle of neutrality and exposes humanitarian actors to heightened risk (Abeytia et al., 2023). While existing literature has extensively examined aid diversion by armed groups and the operational challenges of maintaining neutrality, less attention has been paid to the potential for state-led weaponisation of humanitarian operations within broader strategies of indirect or proxy warfare (Abeytia et al., 2023).

Understanding this gap requires situating humanitarian aid within the evolving nature of external intervention. Contemporary conflicts are increasingly shaped by indirect forms of engagement, in which external actors avoid direct military deployment and instead operate through local partners, financial support, and logistical networks (Okwany and Hansen, 2023). This mode of intervention often allows foreign actors to influence conflict outcomes while maintaining plausible deniability (Okwany and Hansen, 2023). As a result, humanitarian systems, because of their access, infrastructure, and legitimacy can become embedded within these indirect strategies. The politicisation of humanitarian aid is therefore not only a by-product of conflict conditions but also a potential feature of how external influence is exercised in modern warfare.

Sudan provides a particularly relevant case through which to examine these dynamics. The country represents an extreme case of humanitarian vulnerability, shaped by ongoing conflict, institutional collapse, and fragmented authority structures. Osman (2024) shows that humanitarian operations in Sudan are severely constrained by insecurity, damaged infrastructure, restricted movement, and limited coordination mechanisms. As a result, aid delivery increasingly relies on cross-border operations, particularly through eastern Chad. These logistical adaptations, while

necessary, further embed humanitarian action within regional political and security dynamics.

Moreover, humanitarian aid in Sudan is already deeply politicised, even in the absence of overt militarisation (Osman, 2024). Access negotiations, dependence on local intermediaries, and donor conditionality all shape the distribution of aid and determine which populations can be reached (Osman, 2024). The erosion of central state authority reduces oversight and accountability, creating an environment in which humanitarian actors operate in close proximity to political and security forces (Osman, 2024). This proximity reinforces the risk that humanitarian infrastructure and access routes may be co-opted or influenced by competing actors. Sudan therefore, illustrates how structural vulnerability and humanitarian dependence can create conditions in which the politicisation of aid becomes not only possible but systemic.

These internal dynamics are further intensified by the internationalisation of the conflict. 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).

The involvement of Gulf states illustrates how these geopolitical interests intersect with humanitarian and political dynamics on the ground. 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 Saudi 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). In this context, the presence of humanitarian infrastructure and cross-border aid routes, particularly through neighbouring countries, acquires additional strategic significance, as control over access can translate into political and military advantage.

Beyond material support, 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 suggests that the politicisation of humanitarian aid operates not only through physical infrastructure and logistical systems, but also through the narratives that frame humanitarian crises and justify external intervention (Abbas, 2025).

Overall, the literature shows that the politicisation of humanitarian aid is not an exceptional deviation from humanitarian principles but a structural feature of contemporary conflict environments. In contexts such as Sudan, characterised by institutional fragility, high humanitarian dependence, and extensive external involvement, aid becomes embedded within broader systems of power, negotiation, and strategic competition. Examining how humanitarian assistance may be instrumentalised within these dynamics is therefore essential for understanding both the limits of humanitarian neutrality and the evolving nature of modern warfare.

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.

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 diversion.	The UAE insists its aid channels were neutral and compliant with humanitarian law (European Centre for Counterterrorism and Intelligence Studies, 2025).	-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 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	Smoking gun test passed	Confirms that humanitarian-facing or civilian-facing infrastructure may have been used as cover for military logistics and personnel movement	-Weakens the UAE's claim that humanitarian presence was isolated from the conflict. -Weakens the argument that all movement was purely civilian -The notion that all criticism rests only on weak or speculative allegations.

			arms (Reuters, 2024)			
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 examines the initial emplacement of UAE humanitarian operations in Amdjarass, which corresponds to the first independent variable, the UAE humanitarian activity in Chad. At this stage, the analysis primarily relies on temporal and political indicators to establish whether the emergence of humanitarian infrastructure aligns with the early stages of RSF mobilisation and external support patterns.

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). As a major donor, it has also highlighted financial

contributions to UNHCR and broader relief efforts (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025b). These claims are analytically important because they constitute political indicators, reflecting official narratives that present the operation as exclusively civilian. In process-tracing terms, such statements form part of the observable implications of a non-weaponised explanation.
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). This divergence in narratives is itself a political indicator, signalling contestation over the function of humanitarian infrastructure. At the same time, temporal indicators are introduced through flight reporting and open-source investigations, which show repeated UAE cargo movements into Amdjarass shortly after the outbreak of war (Reuters, 2024). This temporal proximity between humanitarian emplacement and conflict escalation is significant, as it establishes that humanitarian operations emerged at a moment of high strategic relevance.

In addition, the spatial indicator begins to take shape in this phase. Amdjarass is located in eastern Chad, in close proximity to Darfur, an RSF stronghold. This geographic positioning creates the structural possibility for overlap between humanitarian logistics and military supply routes. This is key in process-tracing as 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 examines whether UAE humanitarian operations became embedded in broader regional logistics networks, linking the first and third independent variables, humanitarian operations and patterns of military support to the RSF. Here, the analysis draws more heavily on temporal and spatial indicators, while continuing to incorporate political indicators through competing claims.

As shown in Table 1, Reuters reports that UN experts believed the Amdjarass route was likely being used to supply arms, while the UAE maintained that all flights were humanitarian (Reuters, 2024). This contrast again reflects political indicators, highlighting inconsistencies between external assessments and official narratives. However, in this phase temporal patterns constitute the primary source of evidence. The reporting of 24 Il-76TD cargo aircraft landing in Amdjarass in 2024 (The New Arab, 2025) demonstrates sustained, repeated activity. Repetition

over time is key here, as it strengthens causal inference. While a single flight could be explained as emergency relief, an extended pattern of cargo movements raises a stronger inference of embedded logistics.

The spatial indicator becomes more explicit as the analysis connects Amdjarass to known RSF supply corridors. The Conflict Insights Group (2026) shows 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, linking humanitarian operations to evolving patterns of military support. 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 shifts from correlation to mechanism by examining whether the identified logistics network generates dual-use affordances, directly engaging with the concept of weaponisation of humanitarian aid. This phase mobilises all three indicators, spatial, temporal, and political, to assess whether humanitarian infrastructure enables military activity indirectly. Refugees International reports that the UAE simultaneously advanced humanitarian narratives while contributing to RSF violence (Halakhe, 2026). This constitutes a key political indicator, as it reflects the coexistence of humanitarian legitimacy and allegations of military support. Rather than simply indicating inconsistency, this dual narrative suggests that humanitarian discourse may function as a form of strategic cover.

The spatial indicator is further reinforced through the mapping of movement across UAE-linked nodes. The Conflict Insights Group (2026) traces Colombian mercenaries through 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 temporal indicator also plays a role, as the sequencing of movements, from flights, transfers, and eventual battlefield presence, therefore, suggests continuity between logistical flows and military outcomes. The network does not operate as isolated events but as an ongoing chain of activity.

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

The final phase evaluates whether the cumulative effects observed in earlier phases translate into observable military outcomes, thereby linking the third independent variable, patterns of military support, directly to the dependent variable, weaponisation of humanitarian aid. This phase relies strongly on temporal and political indicators, while implicitly grounded in the spatial-logistical system previously established. The Guardian's reporting of alleged "smoking gun" evidence, including material submitted to the UN Security Council and Emirati passports found in conflict zones (Guardian, 2024), constitutes a strong political indicator, as it directly challenges official denials and suggests operational involvement. 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 further reinforces this through temporal indicators, linking UAE-supplied weapons to changes in conflict dynamics, including prolonged fighting and increased civilian casualties. This is analytically significant because it connects alleged inputs, the weapons flow, to observable outputs, the battlefield effects, thereby strengthening causal inference. The earlier established

temporal patterns of flights now gain additional meaning when viewed alongside these outcomes. 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 creates a convergence of indicators: spatial networks, temporal sequences, and political evidence all point toward the same mechanism of military facilitation.

Taken together, the evidence from this phase points to a consistent pattern, with independent sources linking UAE activity to the military capabilities of the RSF. In process-tracing terms, the cumulative evidence approaches a doubly decisive test, as it both supports the weaponisation hypothesis and substantially weakens the purely humanitarian explanation. The key analytical point is that humanitarian infrastructure is not absent, but insufficient to explain the observed military effects without recognising its integration into a broader support system. Overall, 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.

Discussion

This research set out to examine the politicisation and potential weaponisation of humanitarian aid, a phenomenon that the literature has increasingly identified but not fully theorised in the context of indirect and proxy warfare. The findings from the Sudan case reinforce and extend existing critiques of humanitarian neutrality, while also addressing gaps identified in the literature regarding state-led instrumentalisation of aid. The literature on humanitarian principles presents neutrality, impartiality, and independence as foundational to maintaining humanitarian space (Barnett and Weiss, 2008; Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010). However, critical scholars have questioned whether such principles can be sustained in contemporary conflict environments (Ziadah, 2019; Grapengiesser, 2024). The findings of this research strongly support this critique. Across all four phases of the process tracing, humanitarian action in Sudan does not operate within a neutral or insulated space, but within a highly politicised and contested environment. 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). This evidence of negotiated access, contested narratives, and proximity to military actors reflects precisely the kind of "asymmetric and negotiated humanitarian space" described by Grapengiesser (2024). In this sense, the Sudan case does not represent an anomaly but rather an empirical confirmation that humanitarian space is structurally embedded within power relations.

In addition, the research engages with emerging work on humanitarian diplomacy and narrative control (Abbas, 2025). 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 persistent divergence between UAE official

statements and external reporting constitutes a clear example of competing political narratives surrounding humanitarian action. These findings suggest that politicisation operates not only through material practices, such as logistics and infrastructure, but also through discursive strategies that frame and legitimise those practices. In this sense, the Sudan case reinforces the idea that humanitarian legitimacy itself can become a strategic resource.

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.

Therefore, in order to help improve the humanitarian situation, from a policy perspective, the first priority would be 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).

In addition, 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, but 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 further recommendation would be 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.

Beyond these core recommendations, the findings point to a broader need to rethink how humanitarian space is governed in conflict settings. The Sudan case suggests that humanitarian action should not be assumed to be neutral simply because it is labelled humanitarian. In a fragile and militarised environment, humanitarian legitimacy can itself become strategically useful, and can be used for the wrong purposes. Transparency, verification and accountability are therefore essential safeguards. The policy challenge is therefore not to constrain aid, but to protect it from being absorbed into conflict systems.

Conclusion

This research 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 eastern 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 point to a more complex pattern in which humanitarian assistance, logistical access, diplomatic positioning, and alleged military support became increasingly entangled within Sudan's wider conflict economy.

The study therefore contributes to the literature on humanitarian principles, humanitarian space, and the politicisation of aid by showing that neutrality is not simply weakened in conflict settings, but can become structurally difficult to sustain. This supports the critical scholarship that has questioned whether humanitarian space can remain insulated from political and military competition, especially in environments shaped by fragmented authority, contested borders, and external intervention. The Sudan case also extends this literature by showing how humanitarian legitimacy itself can create operational space that may later be absorbed into dual-use logistics and strategic influence. In that sense, the study adds weight to arguments that humanitarian aid is not only constrained by war, but can sometimes become embedded in the architecture of war.

The process-tracing analysis strengthens this contribution by reconstructing a causal sequence that moves from humanitarian emplacement in Amdjarass, to logistical enmeshment and route adaptation, to dual-use affordances, and finally to observable military effects. Repeated cargo flights, shifting transport routes, movement through regional staging points, and the linkage between humanitarian infrastructure and RSF battlefield capacity all support the inference that humanitarian presence in Chad was not fully insulated from the conflict. This does not mean that humanitarian action in Sudan was fictitious or wholly instrumentalised. Rather, it suggests that genuine relief activity may have coexisted with, and at times facilitated, broader strategic and military objectives. That finding is important because it shifts the analytical question from whether humanitarian aid exists to how it operates within a contested conflict environment.

The findings also help to clarify a major gap in the existing literature, which is the limited attention paid to state-led or externally enabled weaponisation of humanitarian operations. Much of the literature focuses on aid diversion by armed groups or on the difficulty of maintaining neutrality in principle. This research shows that external actors can also use humanitarian presence, infrastructure, and diplomatic legitimacy as part of broader proxy strategies. The UAE case is therefore significant not only for Sudan, but for the wider study of indirect intervention, dual-use logistics, and humanitarian diplomacy.

However, this dissertation confronted several methodological challenges that are inherent to researching covert activities in conflict settings. The most significant challenge was the likely unavailability, incompleteness, or deliberate concealment of evidence. Actors involved in indirect or deniable forms of intervention have strong incentives to hide their activities, which means that much of the relevant material remains inaccessible to researchers. As a result, the study could not rely on direct proof alone and instead had to reconstruct the causal process through circumstantial evidence, triangulation, and pattern recognition. This is consistent with process-tracing approaches

that emphasise the accumulation of multiple weak pieces of evidence into a stronger overall inference rather than requiring a single decisive document or event (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). In this sense, the methodological challenge was addressed not by eliminating uncertainty, but by systematically managing it through evidence that, taken together, supported the hypothesised mechanism.

A second challenge concerned the ambiguity of dual-use infrastructure. In conflict zones, the same hospital, airstrip, route, or logistics hub may serve civilian and military purposes at different moments or for different actors. This creates an analytical problem because it is often difficult to determine precisely when humanitarian activity ends and military support begins. The dissertation therefore treated dual-use not as an exceptional anomaly, but as part of the empirical problem under investigation. To reduce the risk of over-interpretation, the analysis relied on repeated patterns across time, space, and political framing rather than isolated incidents. It also sought to remain cautious about causal claims where the evidence remained ambiguous. A further challenge was the risk of confirmation bias, particularly in a case involving allegations of wrongdoing and politically sensitive evidence. To mitigate this, the research maintained a strict focus on triangulation and source comparison, and a further safeguard in a larger research design would have been independent coding or review by another researcher (Befani and Stedman-Bryce, 2017).

If this research were conducted under different conditions of time, access, and resources, it could have been strengthened in several important ways. First, the study would have benefited from a broader and more systematic evidentiary base. Although the process-tracing design was appropriate for a case characterised by secrecy, deniability, and indirect intervention, the analysis necessarily relied heavily on open-source reporting, official statements, and indirect indicators. With more resources, it would have been possible to collect and code flight data more systematically over a longer period, allowing for a more precise reconstruction of transport patterns, repetition, frequency, and route changes. This would have improved the capacity to distinguish between isolated humanitarian movements and sustained logistical operations, thereby strengthening the temporal dimension of the analysis.

Second, additional access to satellite imagery and geospatial evidence would have made it possible to assess the physical use of humanitarian sites and surrounding transport corridors in greater detail. Satellite evidence across a longer time period could have helped identify changes in infrastructure, vehicle movement, construction activity, or increased traffic around sites such as Amdjarass and other staging points. This would have provided a more robust basis for evaluating

spatial overlap between humanitarian infrastructure and possible military or logistical activity. In a case where direct access to the field is limited, geospatial analysis can play an especially important role in corroborating claims that remain difficult to verify through reporting alone.

Third, the research would have been substantially improved by on-site fieldwork and local interviews. If conditions had allowed, direct research in eastern Chad, and potentially in areas closer to Darfur, would have enabled a richer and more grounded understanding of how humanitarian operations were experienced and interpreted by those closest to them. Interviews with humanitarian workers, border officials, transport actors, local residents, displaced populations, and civil society representatives could have provided perspectives that are often absent from international reporting. Such testimonies would not necessarily have resolved questions of intent, but they would have offered deeper insight into how humanitarian presence, border access, and logistical movement were perceived on the ground.

Lastly, a comparative research design would also have strengthened the project. Comparing Sudan with other cases where humanitarian infrastructure has been accused of dual-use or strategic use would have allowed the study to distinguish case-specific dynamics from broader structural patterns. This could have helped clarify whether the features observed in Sudan are exceptional or whether they reflect a more general tendency in conflict settings where external actors exploit humanitarian legitimacy. A comparison with other proxy conflict environments would also have improved the theoretical contribution of the dissertation by showing more clearly how Sudan fits within wider patterns of politicised humanitarianism and indirect intervention.

Despite these limitations, the research offers a strong cumulative case that humanitarian aid in Sudan cannot be treated as automatically neutral simply because it is labelled humanitarian. The central lesson is that humanitarian action may remain genuine and necessary, yet still become embedded in strategic systems that produce military advantage. Protecting civilians therefore requires more than funding assistance: it requires stronger oversight, clearer separation of functions, better monitoring of dual-use routes, and greater accountability for the external actors who sustain the war.

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: 9764

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
- Translation / proofreading
- ✓ 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: