

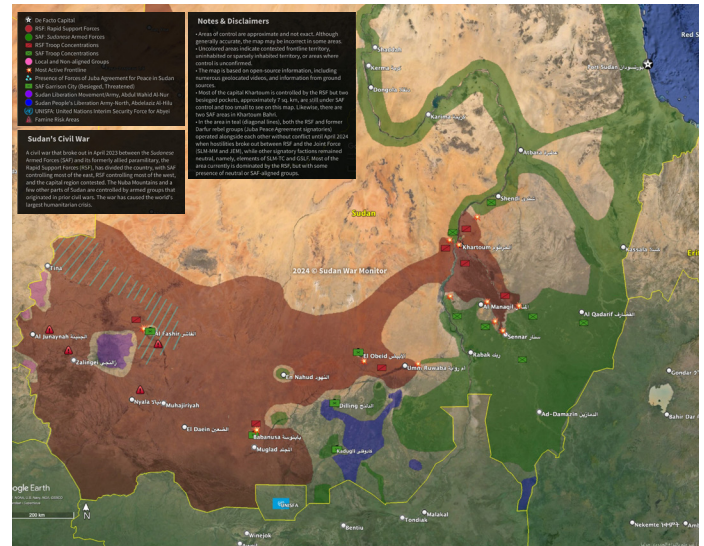
Drones Over Sudan: Foreign Powers in Sudan's Civil War

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Several key foreign actors, including Iran, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have contributed to the civil war in Sudan for over a year by sending drones to the opposing sides. Iran has sent drones to support the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in hope of securing an Iranian Red Sea naval base in exchange.¹ Russia initially used the preexisting relationship between the Kremlin-funded Wagner Group and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to provide drones in early 2023.² Russia switched sides in spring 2024 and promised military aid to the SAF in exchange for its commitment to implement a stalled 2017 agreement that promised Russia a small Red Sea naval base.³ Iran and Russia's intervention directly threatens US policy interests in Sudan by attempting to gain access to Sudan's coast to project naval power into the Red Sea. The UAE has backed the RSF to protect its economic and political influence in Sudan and the Red Sea through its ties with the RSF leader.⁴ Sudan's warring sides have used foreign drones to gain a military advantage on the battlefield and improve their negotiating positions for a ceasefire.

Figure 1. Areas of Control



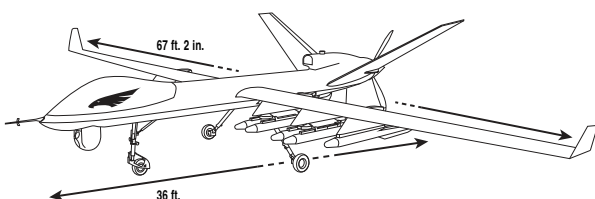
Source: Sudan War Monitor.

Sudan's generally flat geography is conducive to drone strikes and surveillance because there is limited cover. The SAF, the RSF, and their foreign backers have used drones with ranges between 30 km and 4,000 km in roles that vary from combat to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.⁵ Sudan is about 780 miles (1,250 km) from north to south and 860 miles (1,390 km) from east to west, meaning long-range drones like the Chinese-made Wing Loong II drone deployed by the UAE or the Egyptian-donated and Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drone can fly across the country in support of RSF and SAF operations.⁶ Commercially manufactured quadcopter drones with smaller ranges have also been used to attack targets in urban areas like Khartoum, Sudan's capital.⁷

Sudan continues to be a secondary theater for Iran and Russia, but the fall of the Bashar al Assad regime in Syria and Sudan's natural resources will draw future engagement from both countries. Iran and Russia are pursuing their respective priority missions in the Middle East and Ukraine and will likely continue to devote most of their resources to these campaigns. However, Iran and Russia remain interested in Sudan because of its strategic location on the Red Sea and its abundant natural resources, particularly gold.⁸ Russia may increase the small but already growing role of Port Sudan in Russia's logistic network and strategic power projection objectives following the Assad regime's collapse.⁹ It is unclear how the fall of Assad's forces in Syria and the resulting threats to Iran's positions in that country might affect their willingness or ability to support the warring parties in Sudan.

The following list documents the variety and basic capabilities of the foreign drones used in Sudan. It is not an exhaustive list, but it aims to inform the discussion about what kinds of capabilities these systems can give Sudan's warring sides.

Rapid Support Forces (RSF) Inventory



Wing Loong II

Country of origin: China; operated by the UAE¹⁰

Role: Multi-role but has been used for only intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities in Sudan¹¹

Range: 2,485 miles (4,000 km)¹²

Payload capacity: 400 kg¹³

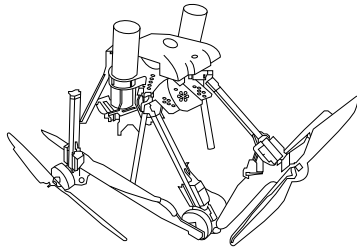
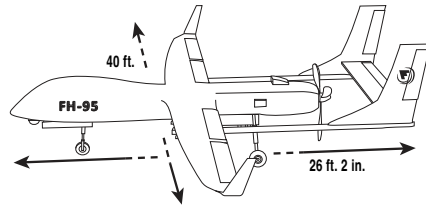
Cost: \$1 to \$2 million¹⁴

Munitions: Laser-guided missiles; laser-guided bombs; antipersonnel bombs¹⁵

First deployment: The UAE has flown missions using the Wing Loong II in support of the RSF since at least July 2024.¹⁶

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Rapid Support Forces (RSF) Inventory *(continued from the previous page)*



FH-95 (Feihong)

Country of origin: China; likely deployed by the UAE based on location¹⁷

Role: Multi-role¹⁸

Range: 155 miles (250 km)¹⁹

Payload capacity: 200–250 kg²⁰

Cost: Unknown

Munitions: Laser-guided bombs and anti-radiation missiles²¹

First deployment: Yale University's Humanitarian Research Lab first observed three FH-95 drones at the RSF-controlled Nyala Airport between December 2024 and January 2025.²²

Unknown Quadcopter Drone

Country of origin: Unknown, possibly Russia²³

Role: Multi-role, primarily used for surveillance²⁴

Range: Unknown

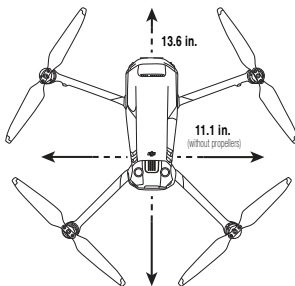
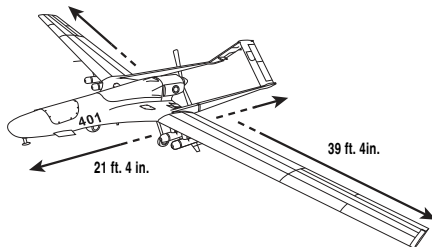
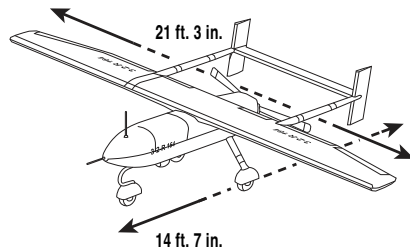
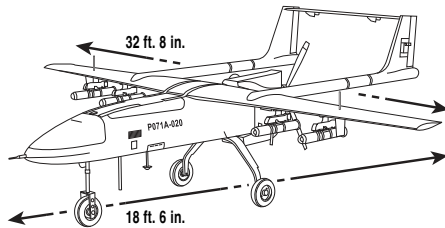
Payload capacity: Unknown

Cost: Unknown

Munitions: Unknown

First deployment: Unknown

Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) Inventory



Mohajer-6

Country of origin: Iran

Role: Multi-role²⁵

Range: 124–1,240 miles (200–2,000 km)²⁶

Payload capacity: 40 kg²⁷

Cost: Unknown

Munitions: Precision-guided bombs; guided anti-tank missiles²⁸

First deployment: The US State Department reported several potential Iranian military cargo shipments from Iran to Port Sudan between December 2023 and July 2024.²⁹

Zajil-3 (locally manufactured Iranian Ababil-3 drone)

Country of origin: Iranian design

Role: Multi-role³⁰

Range: 62–155 miles (100–250 km)³¹

Payload capacity: 45 kg³²

Cost: Unknown; Designed for “low-cost.”³³ Lebanese Hezbollah acquired Ababil drones for \$5,000, according to Western media in 2024.³⁴

Munitions: Precision-guided bombs; guided anti-tank missiles³⁵

First deployment: The SAF first used the Zajil-3 in the civil war in January 2024.³⁶

Bayraktar TB2

Country of origin: Turkey; deployed by Egypt³⁷

Role: Multi-role³⁸

Range: Up to 2,485 miles (Up to 4,000 km)³⁹

Payload capacity: 150 kg⁴⁰

Cost: \$2 to \$5 million⁴¹

Munitions: Four laser-guided munitions⁴²

First deployment: Egypt first delivered the Turkish-made drones to Sudan in September 2023.⁴³

DJI MAVIC 3

Country of origin: China, reportedly deployed by Ukraine⁴⁴

Role: Commercial, quadcopter multi-role drone

Range: 18 miles (30 km)⁴⁵

Payload capacity: Unknown

Cost: Approximately \$2,000 to \$5,000⁴⁶

Munitions: One to two grenades⁴⁷

First deployment: Ukrainian forces in Sudan used drones to strike RSF targets in Khartoum in September 2023, according to a Ukrainian military source familiar with the operation.⁴⁸

Read the full report at

<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/drones-over-sudan-foreign-powers-in-sudans-civil-war>

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