

Proxies in Print: Strategic Narratives of the Sudan Conflict in Digital Media

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Submitted: 14 April 2026 **Accepted:** 3 August 2026 **Published:** 8 October 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Digital Media in Contemporary Conflicts” edited by Kristin Skare Orgeret (Oslo Metropolitan University) and Mulatu Alemayehu Moges (University of Agder), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i516>

Abstract

The Sudanese civil war exemplifies how contemporary proxy conflicts are fiercely contested within digital information ecologies. Utilizing strategic narrative theory, this study examines the structural weaponization of transnational journalism to construct the geopolitical ontology of state collapse. An interpretive analysis of 402 English-language articles from Qatar’s *Al Jazeera English*, the UAE’s *The National*, and the US’s *The New York Times* reveals significant divergences in narrative projection. *The New York Times* frames the crisis through a “global instability” index, actively legitimizing US-led diplomatic intervention. *Al Jazeera English* deploys an identity narrative of “state victimhood” to delegitimize rival paramilitaries and subtextually indict competing Gulf patrons. In stark contrast, *The National* exercises “humanitarian obfuscation,” actively depoliticizing the disaster to shield Emirati proxy interventions from international scrutiny. These findings demonstrate that democratic and authoritarian regimes alike systematically co-opt digital news platforms as soft power arsenals to dictate the geopolitical imaginaries of the Global South.

Keywords

digital journalism; geopolitical newsmaking; proxy warfare; soft power; Sudan conflict

1. Introduction

On April 15, 2023, the outbreak of war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) plunged Sudan into a devastating crisis (Feltman & O’Hanlon, 2025). While the warfare has severely hollowed out the Sudanese state, the violence on the ground represents only one dimension of this conflict. Because both factions rely heavily on external patrons, the Sudanese war has rapidly evolved into a complex proxy conflict (Gregoire, 2024). As a result, the struggle for control over Sudan’s physical territory is inextricably linked to a parallel struggle for international legitimacy.

Contemporary geopolitical crises extend into the digital sphere, creating a critical front line for narrative dominance (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015b; Ruohonen, 2024). With physical access to Sudan increasingly restricted, global understanding of the war is heavily mediated by the visual narratives of transnational digital journalism (Allan, 2025), which actively shape the ethical framing and public engagement of the conflict (Wasserman, 2020). When reporting on Sudan, digital platforms translate the complexities of the conflict through the ideological and geopolitical lenses of their host nations, transforming digital journalism into an arena for proxy narrative warfare.

This study utilizes strategic narrative theory (SNT) to examine how digital journalism is weaponized to manage the optics of proxy warfare in the Sudan conflict. Specifically, it is guided by the following central question: How do global and regional digital news platforms construct system, identity, and issue narratives to align the Sudan conflict with the foreign policy objectives of their host nations?

To answer this, the article analyzes three highly influential media ecosystems: Qatar's *Al Jazeera English* (hereafter *Al Jazeera*), the UAE's *The National*, and the US' *The New York Times* (hereafter *The Times*). These specific outlets were selected because they represent distinct, competing architectures of transnational soft power. Qatar and the UAE are the most heavily capitalized regional powers actively contesting the Horn of Africa, yet they possess diametrically opposed geopolitical agendas: Qatar has historically engaged with political Islamist movements, whereas the UAE aggressively champions a counter-Islamist, authoritarian stability model (Lynch, 2021). On the contrary, *The Times* was selected to represent the Western liberal order. While not state-owned, its elite institutional status functions as a barometer that structurally indexes US foreign policy priorities, providing a crucial comparative baseline against these emerging Gulf narratives (Bunce, 2015; Osipova-Stocker et al., 2021).

To fully grasp the stakes of this digital narrative warfare, the following section first establishes the physical and geopolitical battlefield of the Sudanese collapse. I then present a review of the literature concerning the intersection of conflict, geopolitics, and media framing. Building upon the theoretical framework of SNT, I detail the research methodology and data corpus construction before analyzing the results. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the broader implications for narrative competition in the Global South.

2. The Sudan Conflict: A Context

The conflict that erupted in Sudan on April 15, 2023, represents the catastrophic culmination of deeply entrenched structural vulnerabilities, failed democratic transitions, and a fiercely contested security sector. The immediate catalyst was a dispute between the internationally recognized SAF under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the RSF under General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti). Tensions simmered over the timeline and mechanics of integrating the RSF into the national army—a key stipulation of efforts to restore civilian rule following the joint SAF–RSF military coup in October 2021 (Gregoire, 2024).

The roots of this confrontation extend to former President Omar al-Bashir's strategy of coup-proofing his regime by empowering the RSF—which evolved from the notorious Janjaweed militias of the early 2000s—as a counterbalance to the traditional military establishment (Tubiana, 2023). When the alliance of convenience between Burhan and Hemedti collapsed following their joint October 2021 coup, this fragmented security apparatus fractured into open warfare. What began as an internal power struggle in the capital, Khartoum,

rapidly metastasized into a highly internationalized proxy war, sustained by complex external alignments and a lucrative war economy (Feltman & O'Hanlon, 2025; Gregoire, 2024).

The SAF and RSF are highly reliant on foreign patronage to sustain their military campaigns. The SAF has historically received backing from neighboring Egypt, which views the Sudanese military as a crucial pillar of regional stability. In contrast, the RSF has heavily leveraged illicit economic networks, particularly gold smuggling, to finance its operations and secure sophisticated weaponry. A critical player in this dynamic appears to be the UAE, which has been consistently linked to alleged military and logistical support for the RSF. According to several sources, the UAE likely functions as a vital transshipment point for weapons and a primary destination for smuggled Sudanese gold, which would effectively subsidize the RSF's war effort and complicate international mediation attempts (De Koning, 2025; Soliman & Baldo, 2025; The Sentry, 2026). This influx of foreign arms and capital has transformed a domestic crisis into a regionalized security imperative, entrenching instability and insulating the belligerents from domestic pressures to negotiate a ceasefire (Feltman & O'Hanlon, 2025).

This protracted violence has precipitated the largest displacement crisis in the world, forcibly displacing over 12.4 million people ("Sudan: 14 million displaced," 2026). The systemic collapse of governance has left millions facing acute famine and disease. In Darfur, the RSF's systematic campaigns have involved ethnically targeted killings and sexual violence that observers warn are consistent with patterns of genocide, echoing atrocities committed two decades prior (Taylor, 2026).

Beyond the violence and humanitarian collapse, the Sudanese conflict is distinctly characterized by a sophisticated regime of mediated warfare. In an era where communication is a central component of conflict, the digital sphere has become a vital front line for narrative dominance. Both the SAF and RSF, along with their regional backers, have systematically weaponized digital platforms to manipulate public perception, mobilize supporters, and conduct coordinated disinformation campaigns (Ibrahim, 2025). As several sources argue, this information manipulation functions as a deliberate strategic instrument deployed to launder the reputations of the warring parties and obfuscate their atrocities (e.g., Lynch, 2021; Rauta, 2020). Sophisticated online networks routinely deploy hate speech and false narratives to dehumanize specific ethnic communities or portray civilians as enemy collaborators—rhetoric that frequently precedes and justifies offline violence on the ground (Thomson Foundation, 2026).

3. Mediating State Collapse: Proxy Warfare and Transnational Journalism

The digital dimensions of the Sudan conflict necessitate a critical re-evaluation of how contemporary crises in the Global South are mediatized and contested on the global stage. To capture this dynamic, I situate the current study at the intersection of three bodies of literature: the postcolonial critique of African crisis reporting, the evolution of proxy warfare, and the geopolitical utility of state-aligned journalism.

Postcolonial scholars extensively document how Western legacy media traditionally frame African crises through reductive tropes of inherent tribalism, state failure, and inescapable hopelessness (Bunce, 2017; Nothias, 2018). Such reporting historically strips conflicts of their global political economy, obscuring the historical legacies of colonialism and the ongoing structural violence of international resource extraction (Wasserman, 2020). However, the rapid expansion of digital ecologies and social media networks over the

past decade has fundamentally disrupted traditional Western gatekeeping. As mobile penetration deepens across the continent, domestic belligerents, local civil society actors, and regional powers are increasingly able to bypass Western legacy media to directly mediate their own crises and mobilize transnational diasporas (Mare et al., 2021).

While this digital shift democratizes certain aspects of crisis communication, it also introduces profound information vulnerabilities. State collapse and fragmented security architectures create highly volatile digital environments. As a result, scholars have increasingly documented how domestic belligerents and external actors exploit these vulnerabilities, utilizing tactics such as targeted digital disinformation and strategic internet shutdowns to suppress information and assert digital sovereignty amidst political instability (Mare et al., 2019; Ruohonen, 2024). This weaponized information ecosystem ensures that the digital sphere is not merely a reflection of the conflict but an active, contested domain where the parameters of the war are defined and negotiated.

In this mediatized environment, the mechanics of proxy warfare undergo significant shifts. Traditionally defined by the provision of weapons, financial logistics, and military training (Mumford, 2013; Rondeaux & Sterman, 2019), modern proxy conflicts like Sudan demonstrate that controlling the narrative regarding who is responsible and what constitutes an acceptable resolution is just as critical as controlling physical territory (Rauta, 2020). Here, it is essential to engage with “weaponization,” which refers to the deliberate deployment of journalistic discourse—such as targeted blame or humanitarian depoliticization—to materially alter the conflict’s trajectory. These media outlets actively interfere by curating international optics: framing proxy forces as legitimate actors or obscuring their atrocities creates permissive diplomatic environments that shield external sponsors from sanctions, directly sustaining these armed groups’ ability to wage physical war (Lynch, 2021; Szostek, 2020). However, this conceptualization of weaponization must be carefully problematized. While structural analysis reveals a clear editorial intent to interfere, projecting a narrative does not guarantee its political reception or kinetic success (Seib, 2012). Because this study relies on textual artifacts rather than audience or policy metrics, “weaponization” here denotes a deliberate discursive strategy rather than a proven material outcome.

To project narratives globally, states utilize transnational journalism as diplomatic proxies designed to challenge or sustain media hegemonies (Figenschou, 2013; Jones, 2020). For example, *Al Jazeera* leverages its position to project Doha’s foreign policy; despite relative editorial autonomy, its state funding links its output to Qatar’s soft power architecture (Figenschou, 2013; Samuel-Azran, 2010). Similarly, the UAE’s *The National*, deeply tied to the Abu Dhabi royal family, functions as a conduit for Emirati geopolitical messaging to Western audiences (Cherkaoui, 2021; Ulrichsen, 2022). Driven by different structural imperatives, publicly traded Western legacy media like *The Times* structurally index the foreign policy anxieties of the American political establishment through heavy reliance on official sourcing, often subordinating localized crises to systemic US anxieties about great power competition (Bunce, 2015; Ramani, 2023).

These dynamics are not unique to the Sudanese context. A robust body of literature demonstrates how these specific nations have historically deployed their media architectures to advance strategic narratives in other conflict zones. During the 2011 Arab Spring, Qatar utilized *Al Jazeera* to aggressively project its foreign policy, shifting the network’s editorial stance to legitimize Qatari-backed factions in Syria and Libya (Samuel-Azran, 2010). Similarly, the UAE has deployed its digital media apparatus to launder its military

interventions, utilizing English-language outlets to project a counter-revolutionary, anti-Islamist narrative during proxy wars in Yemen and Libya (Jones, 2020). In addition, studies on elite US media demonstrate that media like *The Times* heavily indexed the American political establishment's strategic narratives during the 2003 Iraq War, mirroring the state's military framing to legitimize foreign policy objectives (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005). Thus, the mediation of the Sudan conflict represents the latest iteration of these established, state-aligned narrative strategies.

Although Western media bias, digital disinformation in Africa, and Gulf state soft power strategies have been studied extensively in isolation, their convergence within Sudan's multi-directional narrative proxy war remains largely unexamined. Moreover, traditional media theories, such as framing theory (Entman, 1993), often fall short of capturing the deliberate, state-sponsored narrative competition at play. Framing theory excels at identifying episodic bias or thematic emphasis but it is less equipped to explain how entire global media ecosystems structurally align to project comprehensive, competing worldviews designed to legitimize proxy warfare and shift international policy. To adequately address this gap and understand how digital platforms construct the "blame" and "solution" of the Sudanese collapse, this study deploys SNT—a more robust, macroscopic framework that is capable of mapping communication power in the international geopolitical terrain.

4. SNT

Pioneered by Miskimmon et al. (2013), SNT emerged at the intersection of international relations and political communication. It posits that political actors strategically construct and project shared meanings of the past, present, and future to shape the behavior of domestic and international audiences, manage expectations, and legitimize the projection of power (Roselle et al., 2014). SNT treats communication not merely as a reflection of foreign policy but as a structural component of soft power itself (Miskimmon et al., 2013). In the context of contemporary conflict, narratives are actively weaponized to legitimize authority, justify geopolitical interventions, and attract international alliances, thereby transforming the digital information space into a contested theater of war (Graef, 2023; Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015a).

SNT operationalizes this meaning-making process by conceptualizing narratives across three distinct, interconnecting levels (Miskimmon et al., 2013). First, "system narratives" describe the overarching structure of international affairs—such as great power competition or global instability—frequently deployed by hegemonic powers to subordinate localized crises of sovereignty to broader global anxieties (Ramani, 2023). Second, "identity narratives" construct the moral and political values of the specific actors involved. They are crucial in warfare, involving the deliberate construction of victims, villains, and saviors to shape how international observers perceive belligerents and third-party mediators (Mutahi & Kimari, 2024). Finally, "issue narratives" address acute crises by explicitly assigning "blame" and prescribing an acceptable "solution" (Miskimmon et al., 2013). More importantly, issue narratives dictate policy responses; framing a conflict as an "insurgency" inherently politicizes the violence whereas framing it as a "humanitarian disaster" depoliticizes the crisis, often shielding the agency of belligerents and their external sponsors (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2019). Empirically, SNT has been successfully deployed to deconstruct narrative warfare in various contemporary conflicts, such as Russian state media framing of the Syrian civil war (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2019) and the weaponization of identity narratives during the Ukraine crisis (Szostek, 2020).

When applied to the study of transnational digital journalism, SNT illuminates how global media ecosystems function as diplomatic proxies. State-funded networks, state-aligned regional broadcasters, and elite legacy media are deeply embedded within the political economies of their host nations (Flew et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2020). Consequently, these platforms do not exist in a vacuum; they curate and amplify specific system, identity, and issue narratives that align with their respective national interests. Digital journalism, in this sense, becomes more of a vital conduit for narrative competition rather than a platform of news-making rigor (Boichak, 2021).

5. Methods

To investigate how competing geopolitical interests mediate the Sudan conflict, this study employs SNT as its primary interpretive lens. Analyzing news as discursive artifacts, this method evaluates how articles construct macro-level political meaning across three interconnecting tiers: system, identity, and issue narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013). In practice, this close reading entails systematically isolating textual segments that introduce specific actors or events, and interrogating the underlying assumptions that shape their characterization. Through an evaluation of which historical contexts are amplified or deliberately omitted within these segments, the analysis captures how overarching political agendas are woven into daily reporting. Mapping these curated trajectories and causal attributions against the host nations' foreign policy objectives then uncovers how digital journalism functions as a soft power proxy (Graef, 2023; Szostek, 2020).

The data collection strategy was designed to capture the critical first 18 months of the war, a period characterized by intense escalation, the collapse of bilateral negotiations, and rapid shifts in the international diplomatic response. The corpus timeframe spans April 15, 2023—when active hostilities officially erupted in Khartoum—to October 31, 2024. The endpoint was selected to encompass the full 18-month trajectory of the war's initial phase, culminating in the severe disintegration of state authority, the fracturing of local alliances, and the escalated ethnic violence observed across Darfur in late 2024 (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2024).

To assemble a highly relevant and focused dataset across the three selected media ecosystems, a standardized Boolean search parameter was deployed. The exact search string—"Sudan" AND ("SAF" OR "RSF")—was applied uniformly across the specific institutional domains of the target publications (www.aljazeera.com, www.nytimes.com, and www.thenationalnews.com), all using English as a medium of publication. This protocol retrieved articles focused on the primary belligerents, filtering out tangential regional roundups.

Analyzing exclusively English-language output constitutes a methodological limitation. For example, the exclusion of media from other Arab or African nations does not signify these countries do not have geopolitical interest or clout in the Sudanese conflict; neither does it assume Qatar, UAE, and the US are the conflict's only mediators. Rather, the study's focus on *Al Jazeera*, *The Times*, and *The National* is informed by their extensive international reach and strong English language dissemination (which also lends itself to the linguistic intelligibility of the researcher). It should be noted that, in recent years, Gulf states have substantially expanded English platforms to launder interventions globally (Al-Rawi, 2016; Rouhana, 2023).

The systematic search yielded a final corpus of 402 digital news articles. The distribution of this yield reflects the varying editorial priorities and regional proximities of the outlets: *Al Jazeera* contributed the vast majority of the corpus with 298 articles, denoting Qatar’s intense regional focus and historical investment in Sudanese politics; the UAE’s *The National* yielded 55 articles; and *The Times* produced 49 articles, indicating a more episodic, elite engagement with the crisis characteristic of Western legacy media (see Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of news articles in the analytical corpus (April 15, 2023–October 31, 2024).

Media Outlet	Host Nation	Article Frequency (n)	Percentage of Corpus
<i>Al Jazeera English</i>	Qatar	298	74.1%
<i>The National</i>	UAE	55	13.7%
<i>The Times</i>	US	49	12.2%
Total		402	100%

Data analysis utilized a two-cycle thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2021). In the first cycle, I applied a deductive framework rooted in SNT’s tripartite structure (Miskimmon et al., 2013). To systematize the corpus, a Python script was deployed to extract preliminary qualitative codes from the PDFs, isolating specific text segments corresponding to system narratives (international order framing), identity narratives (characterizations of the SAF, RSF, and backers), and issue narratives (root causes and proposed solutions). In the second cycle, these extracted segments underwent constant comparison (Charmaz, 2014) to systematically cross-reference the extracted codes. Through a critical evaluation of latent discursive strategies like lexical omissions and historical framing, this rigorous synthesis mapped how emergent geopolitical themes coalesced: *The Times* indexed “global instability,” *Al Jazeera* constructed “state victimhood,” and *The National* deployed “humanitarian obfuscation.” By subsequently triangulating these patterns against the foreign policy objectives of the US, Qatar, and the UAE, the interpretive analysis uncovers not just what the digital platforms reported, but how their journalism functioned as a strategic proxy in the battle for international legitimacy.

6. Analysis

This section presents the findings derived from applying the tripartite framework of SNT—evaluating system, identity, and issue narratives—to map how *Al Jazeera*, *The National*, and *The Times* function as sophisticated diplomatic proxies that align the Sudan conflict with the foreign policy anxieties of their respective host nations.

6.1. *Al Jazeera*

The analysis of Qatar’s *Al Jazeera* demonstrates an editorial strategy that heavily emphasizes the severe humanitarian toll of the conflict and the destructive influence of regional proxy interference. The network predominantly relies on identity narratives that construct a framework of “state victimhood,” actively delegitimizing the RSF by centering civilian suffering and the group’s legacy of atrocities. Additionally, it deploys system and issue narratives to implicitly indict the illicit supply chains of external sponsors—most notably the UAE—while framing the war as a structural inevitability and exposing the performative illusions of international peacemaking efforts.

6.1.1. System Narratives: Regional Proxies and the Indictment of External Interference

While system narratives concerning the global geopolitical order are less dominant in *Al Jazeera* compared to its Western counterparts, they surface critically as subtextual critiques of regional proxy interference. Rather than framing the war solely as an internal dispute, *Al Jazeera* internationalizes the crisis by highlighting the illicit logistical networks sustaining the war. The network repeatedly deploys phrases like the “influx of foreign weapons” and “illicit gold smuggling” to expose how an interconnected web of external actors exploits Sudan’s vulnerabilities.

While the publication maintains a degree of journalistic caution—often utilizing quotes from UN experts or international monitors rather than direct editorial accusations—it consistently provides a platform for narratives that expose the “shadowy supply chains” and the destabilizing role of external sponsors. For example, it actively reports on the illicit flow of arms across borders, noting: “In January, a UN report compiled for the UN Security Council said it had ‘credible’ evidence that the UAE had sent weapons to the RSF ‘several times per week’ via Amdjarass in northern Chad. The UAE denied the accusation” (“UAE denies sending weapons,” 2024, para. 2).

By shining a journalistic spotlight on these logistical lifelines, *Al Jazeera* indirectly indicts the UAE, Qatar’s primary geopolitical rival in the Gulf. Through this subtle but consistent system narrative, the network positions external interference as a critical driver of the region’s instability, highlighting the hypocrisy of an international system that issues diplomatic platitudes while tacitly enabling the crisis.

6.1.2. Identity Narratives: The “Primary Discursive Engine” of State Victimhood

Identity narratives achieve overwhelming thematic salience in *Al Jazeera*, functioning as the primary discursive engine to construct a framework of “state victimhood.” By focusing intensely on the specific atrocities committed by the warring factions, this editorial posture aligns with Qatar’s geopolitical strategy, which favors the stability of recognized state institutions and positions Doha as a moral arbiter within the transnational Arab public sphere.

To construct these divergent identities, *Al Jazeera* relies on deliberate lexical choices and persistent historical contextualization. The network deeply characterizes the RSF not as a legitimate political or military actor, but as a rogue, marauding militia driven by plunder. Articles frequently utilize specific terms such as “pillaging,” “marauding,” and “lawless” to describe the paramilitary’s actions. Furthermore, *Al Jazeera* explicitly links the RSF’s modern identity to the infamous Janjaweed militias, highlighting a legacy of ethnic cleansing and terror. The network centers the voices of displaced civilians to strip the RSF of any political legitimacy, as vividly illustrated in this historical anchoring:

During the first Darfur war in 2003, government-backed “Arab” militias—which were more commonly known as the “Janjaweed” and later repackaged as the RSF—displaced “non-Arabs” from their lands, looted and burned markets and hospitals, and subjected women and girls to sexual violence, according to Human Rights Watch. The RSF are now committing the same atrocities in Khartoum. (Nashed, 2024, para. 12)

By amplifying this devastation and anchoring it to a specific belligerent, the network strategically delegitimizes the paramilitary group and, by extension, its regional external backers. Testimonies are used to frame the RSF's violence as inherently nihilistic. Speaking to *Al Jazeera*, one resident's characterization strips the group of all political ideology, defining them purely through terror: "They don't have any [political] goal here....They love to attack, loot and destroy. It's revenge" (Nashed, 2024, para. 13).

However, *Al Jazeera's* identity narratives do not spare the state military. The SAF is characterized as an increasingly paranoid and oppressive apparatus that turns its weapons on the very citizens it is constitutionally mandated to protect. The coverage exposes how the military exploits ethnic divisions, noting that the "army seems to be cracking down on people from regions where its rivals, the RSF, have some support, accusing them of being RSF 'sleeper cells'" (Nashed, 2024, para. 5). By comprehensively defining both factions through their atrocities—the RSF's marauding vengeance and the SAF's ethnic paranoia—*Al Jazeera* actively curates an information ecosystem where state legitimacy is fiercely defended by centering civilian suffering, while the perpetrators of state collapse are systematically delegitimized on the global stage.

6.1.3. Issue Narratives: Structural Inevitability and the Illusion of Peacemaking

Al Jazeera deploys issue narratives to frame the war not as a spontaneous eruption of violence, but as a structural inevitability. Utilizing phrases like a "power struggle by design" and "divide-and-rule strategy," the network traces the crisis directly back to former authoritarian President Omar al-Bashir's coup-proofing strategies, asserting that the state manufactured its own collapse by creating a parallel paramilitary force.

Furthermore, *Al Jazeera* utilizes issue narratives to critique ongoing diplomatic interventions, regularly exposing the futility of international peacemaking efforts. The network routinely covers the collapse of US and Saudi-brokered talks in Jeddah, employing phrases like "political ploy," "red herring," and "war by other means" to describe the negotiations. These diplomatic solutions are framed as performative illusions manipulated by the belligerents to rearm, reposition, and appease international optics while actively ignoring the humanitarian catastrophe on the ground. As one expert quoted in the corpus notes regarding an RSF peace proposal: "If they show they are at the table and being involved in these mediations, then it allows them some wiggle room and removes attention from what they are doing on the battlefield. It's a perfect red herring" (Nashed, 2024, para. 11).

Rather than focusing purely on elite political settlements, *Al Jazeera's* issue narratives heavily emphasize the dire consequences of the conflict. By extensively documenting the "catastrophic hunger," the collapse of healthcare infrastructure, and the mass displacement of civilians, the network defines the overarching issue as a manufactured tragedy born from the selfish political ambitions of two rival generals. In doing so, *Al Jazeera* assigns blame to both factions for derailing Sudan's fragile democratic transition and utilizing starvation and violence as tools of systemic control.

6.2. The National

The coverage provided by the UAE's *The National* operates primarily as a mechanism for international reputation management and the aggressive denial of proxy warfare allegations. Through the extensive use of

system narratives, the publication projects the UAE as a benevolent, stabilizing mediator while actively deflecting accusations of malicious external interference onto other actors, such as Iran. Its identity and issue narratives are carefully designed to diffuse blame by creating an equivalence between the warring generals, deploying a strategy of humanitarian obfuscation to depoliticize the crisis and shield the UAE's geopolitical interventions.

6.2.1. System Narratives: Benevolent Mediation and the Denial of Proxy Dynamics

The National utilizes system narratives to aggressively manage the UAE's international reputation and deny proxy warfare allegations. The publication constructs a systemic vision of the UAE as a stabilizing pillar working alongside the US and UN to broker peace. To counter accusations that the UAE is arming the RSF, the publication platforms high-profile Sudanese figures who actively dismiss these claims. For example, it features voices like former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok to project an identity narrative of Emirati benevolence, prominently quoting his assertion that the UAE "has always been supportive of Sudan," and his subsequent call for the UAE, alongside other Gulf states, "to help us rebuild Sudan when this war stops" (Al-Oraibi, 2024, para. 29).

In this constructed system, the UAE is framed prominently as a "force for good." In contrast, when *The National* seeks to highlight malicious external interference, it directs its systemic critique elsewhere—specifically toward Iran. The publication points out that "Washington is already alarmed by Khartoum's close ties with Iran, which has supplied Gen Al Burhan's army with attack drones that shifted the balance of power in favour of the army" (Hendawi & Ahmed, 2024, para. 21). By projecting the threat of proxy warfare onto Iran's relationship with the SAF, *The National* deflects attention from the UAE's logistical pipelines to the RSF. As such, these system narratives curate an international geopolitical landscape where the UAE's interventions are exclusively humanitarian and diplomatic. In doing so, the coverage ensures the host nation's foreign policy objectives remain insulated from the violent unfolding of the Sudanese collapse.

6.2.2. Identity Narratives: Diffusing Blame and the Specter of Political Islam

Unlike *Al Jazeera's* historicization of RSF brutality, *The National* constructs identity narratives that diffuse blame, characterizing the war as a "fight for military and political domination between two rival generals" (Hendawi & Ahmed, 2023, para. 20). Aligning with the UAE's objective to counter political Islam, the publication subtly legitimizes the RSF by framing the SAF as compromised by Muslim Brotherhood elements: "This fight is essentially between the RSF and a segment of the army made up of extremists loyal to Al Bashir's regime....To him [Gen Dagalo], this is an existential battle" (Hendawi, 2023, paras. 36–38).

Through a framing that depicts the SAF not as a legitimate sovereign military, but as an institution hijacked by "extremists loyal to Al Bashir's regime" (Hendawi, 2023, para. 36), *The National* shifts the moral burden of the conflict. The RSF is subsequently characterized not merely as a rogue militia, but as a faction fighting an "existential battle" against the resurgence of a hated, Islamist dictatorship. While *The National* acknowledges the RSF's abuses, it frequently balances these reports by emphasizing the SAF's indiscriminate use of air power, noting that "army air strikes against RSF positions in residential areas have killed thousands of civilians" (Hendawi, 2024, para. 5). This carefully curated identity landscape prevents the RSF from bearing the sole mantle of villainy.

6.2.3. Issue Narratives: Humanitarian Obfuscation and the Depoliticization of Conflict

In the coverage of the Sudan war, *The National* overwhelmingly relies on issue narratives to manage the geopolitical optics of the conflict. Facing extensive international scrutiny over its alleged arming of the RSF, the UAE uses *The National* to strategically deflect from battlefield realities through humanitarian obfuscation. The corpus is saturated with reporting on displacement, cholera, and famine. By defining the war's core "issue" primarily as a humanitarian disaster requiring relief rather than a political crisis requiring accountability, the publication depoliticizes the violence. This is starkly evident in its coverage of UAE diplomatic statements regarding starvation in Darfur:

The UAE unequivocally condemns the use of starvation as a weapon of war, the denial of humanitarian access for civilians in need, and the indiscriminate attacks that make it impossible for people to receive assistance—all these are clear violations of international humanitarian law. (Evans, 2024b, para. 9)

This issue narrative performs a dual function. First, it obscures the RSF's culpability in creating the very famine conditions the article decries, as the paramilitary's siege tactics are responsible for the starvation in places like El Fasher and the Zamzam camp. Second, it aligns with the UAE's foreign policy, allowing the host nation to project soft power through humanitarian aid rhetoric. *The National* extensively covers the UAE's benevolent interventions, detailing the establishment of a "\$20 million, 50-bed hospital in the eastern city of Abeche" in Chad and multi-million-dollar donations to UN agencies for refugee women (Evans, 2024a, para. 2). Through these issue narratives, the conflict is sanitized into a tragic natural disaster, shielding the UAE's geopolitical investments in the RSF from international scrutiny.

6.3. *The Times*

Reflecting the foreign policy anxieties of the American political establishment, *The Times* contextualizes the Sudanese collapse primarily through a "global instability" index driven by great power competition. The publication utilizes identity narratives to characterize both warring factions as selfish, ruthless military elites who deliberately subverted Sudan's fragile democratic transition, stripping both actors of political legitimacy. The overarching issue narrative strongly advocates for Western, specifically US-led, diplomatic intervention as the indispensable solution to halt the violence and address the ensuing humanitarian catastrophe.

6.3.1. System Narratives: The "Global Instability" Index and Great Power Competition

Relying predominantly on system narratives, *The Times* contextualizes the war through a "global instability" index that acts as a barometer for American foreign policy anxieties. Rather than treating the war as an internal dispute, *The Times* emphasizes its potential for regional spillover and vulnerability to foreign interference, highlighting how state collapse threatens neighboring countries and sparks fears of a resurgent global terror threat.

As the publication explicitly notes, "European leaders fear an influx of refugees. American intelligence worries that a lawless Sudan could become a terrorist haven" (Walsh, 2024, para. 16). Additionally, *The Times* uses system narratives to map the conflict onto broader theaters of great power competition. It meticulously details

the opportunistic interventions of external actors, framing Sudan as a proxy battleground that threatens the liberal international order:

Other foreign powers are already involved in the conflict, choosing sides and providing weapons that ravage civilian neighborhoods. The United Arab Emirates has armed the R.S.F. Iran supplied drones to the military. Russia, over the course of the war, has backed both sides. (Walsh, 2024, para. 17)

By foregrounding these systemic vulnerabilities, *The Times* translates the complexities of the Sudanese context into a broader narrative of democratic fragility versus autocratic resurgence. The war is mediatized not just as a localized tragedy, but as a direct threat to global security that demands Western diplomatic engagement.

6.3.2. Identity Narratives: Rival Generals and the Subversion of Democracy

In *The Times*, the belligerents' identity is constructed through a lens of authoritarian betrayal. Unlike *Al Jazeera's* focus on state victimhood or *The National's* diffusion of blame, *The Times* squarely characterizes the conflict as a selfish power struggle between two ruthless military elites who deliberately subverted Sudan's democratic transition. The RSF is explicitly anchored to past atrocities, described as "successors to the notorious Janjaweed militias that slaughtered ethnic African tribes in Darfur in the 2000s" (Leatherby et al., 2024, para. 5).

However, the publication is equally condemnatory of the SAF. By framing both factions as anti-democratic forces that united to overthrow the civilian government in a 2021 coup before turning their weapons on each other, *The Times* strips both actors of any political legitimacy: "Both sides in the 17-month conflict—the Sudanese army and its rival, the Rapid Support Forces paramilitaries—have killed, mutilated and tortured people, including children" (Cumming-Bruce, 2024, para. 2).

In contrast to the generals, civilian identity is constructed around the tragic loss of democratic hope, frequently juxtaposing the current devastation with the "euphoric hopes" of the 2019 revolution to reinforce the dichotomy between oppressive elites and a populace yearning for democratic governance.

6.3.3. Issue Narratives: The Humanitarian Imperative and US-Led Mediation

For *The Times*, the central "issue" is the catastrophic humanitarian fallout of a derailed democratic transition. The publication extensively documents the unraveling healthcare system and famine (Chutel, 2023, para. 1), utilizing issue narratives to advocate for specific diplomatic solutions—primarily US-led mediation. Unlike *Al Jazeera's* skepticism toward international talks, *The Times* frames American diplomatic intervention as a necessary imperative. The coverage frequently centers on US-backed peace talks in Geneva and Jeddah, positioning the then Biden administration as the indispensable mediator attempting to enforce a cease-fire and secure humanitarian access:

Talks that began in Saudi Arabia last weekend between the warring parties, brokered by Saudis and Americans, have so far yielded no breakthrough—even though these talks have only the modest goal of reaching an actual cease-fire, to allow humanitarian aid into the country. (Dahir & Engelbrecht, 2023, para. 4)

While acknowledging the difficulties and the frequent boycotts by the warring factions, *The Times'* issue narratives consistently center the perspectives of American officials, US envoys, and Western humanitarian agencies. By defining the solution to the conflict through the lens of US diplomatic engagement, the publication aligns the resolution of the crisis with the Biden administration's specific foreign policy objectives, framing its diplomatic intervention as the most viable mechanism to halt the violence and restore the promise of civilian rule.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study offer a critical opportunity to expand theoretical frameworks of proxy warfare beyond traditional material and logistical lenses (Mumford, 2013; Rondeaux & Sterman, 2019). When compared directly (see Table 2), the three media ecosystems reveal distinctly divergent soft-power arsenals: *The Times* legitimizes Western intervention through a systemic "global instability" lens; *Al Jazeera* uses identity narratives to center state victimhood and indict Gulf rivals; and *The National* deploys issue narratives as humanitarian obfuscation to shield Emirati complicity. This systematic deployment of digital journalism demonstrates that information control is no longer an auxiliary component of warfare, but a primary theater of engagement (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015a; Prier, 2017). Transnational platforms function as active "narrative proxies," instrumentalized to launder geopolitical interventions, shield illicit supply chains, and delegitimize rival patrons. As such, conflict theory must explicitly recognize digital news ecosystems as structural components of modern proxy warfare.

Table 2. Comparative summary of SNT findings.

Media Outlet (Host Nation)	System Narratives (International Order)	Identity Narratives (Characterization)	Issue Narratives (Blame and Solutions)
<i>Al Jazeera</i> (Qatar)	Indicts regional proxy interference; exposes illicit supply chains and arms smuggling to indirectly target UAE interventions.	Constructs "state victimhood"; delegitimizes both the RSF (as a rogue militia) and the SAF (as an oppressive apparatus); centers civilian suffering.	Frames the conflict as a structural inevitability and manufactured tragedy; critiques international diplomatic peacemaking as a performative illusion.
<i>The National</i> (UAE)	Projects the UAE as a benevolent mediator and stabilizing pillar; aggressively denies proxy warfare allegations; deflects blame for external interference onto Iran.	Diffuses blame as a clash of egos; delegitimizes the SAF as compromised by Islamist extremists while subtly legitimizing the RSF's fight.	Employs "humanitarian obfuscation" to depoliticize the violence into a naturalized disaster, shielding Emirati proxy interventions from scrutiny.
<i>The Times</i> (US)	Indexes "global instability" and great power competition; frames the conflict as a proxy battleground that threatens the liberal international order.	Frames the conflict as an authoritarian betrayal; strips both military factions of legitimacy; defines civilians by the tragic loss of democratic hope.	Centers the humanitarian fallout of a derailed democracy; advocates for Western, US-led diplomatic intervention as the indispensable solution.

This conceptual shift exposes the limitations of traditional media sociology, particularly classical framing theory, in capturing the multi-directional complexities of contemporary statecraft. The current study's use of

SNT provides a more comprehensive architecture for this macroscopic analysis (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Yet, the findings of this study also provoke a critical refinement of SNT itself. Traditionally, SNT posits that actors deploy issue narratives to actively assign blame and prescribe political solutions. However, *The National's* strategic use of humanitarian obfuscation reveals a powerful inversion of this theoretical assumption: issue narratives can be hyper-weaponized to deliberately *depoliticize* a crisis. By framing the Sudanese war almost exclusively as a naturalized humanitarian disaster requiring benevolent aid—thereby obscuring the UAE's alleged role in arming the perpetrators of that disaster—the publication demonstrates that the strategic omission of political blame is just as potent as its explicit assignment. SNT must therefore evolve to account for how “apolitical” or humanitarian discourses are routinely mobilized as highly political shields in international relations (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2019).

In addition, the data challenges the theoretical assumption that the deployment of strategic narratives is exclusively the domain of state-funded or authoritarian media apparatuses. A robust body of literature rightly examines how networks like Qatar's *Al Jazeera* or Türkiye's *TRT* function as direct instruments of public diplomacy designed to challenge Western media hegemony (Jones, 2020; Szostek, 2020). However, the analysis of *The Times* reveals that elite, privately-owned legacy media in democratic contexts engage in a parallel, albeit more organic, form of strategic mediation. By filtering the Sudanese collapse through a “global instability” index and emphasizing the threats of Russian mercenaries and Iranian drones, *The Times* effortlessly indexes the foreign policy anxieties of the American political establishment (Bunce, 2015; Ramani, 2023). This finding pushes SNT to better theorize how hegemonic ideologies and systemic anxieties structurally align “independent” journalism with state imperatives without the need for direct coercion or state funding. Additionally, while SNT provides a robust framework for analyzing the projection of geopolitical narratives, the concept of media weaponization itself must be critically problematized. Projection does not guarantee persuasion, nor does editorial intent automatically translate into material diplomatic interference (Seib, 2012). Because textual analysis cannot empirically verify whether these narratives successfully altered policy or prolonged battlefield realities, future research must move beyond the text. Scholars must investigate audience reception and policy impacts to understand how global stakeholders and diaspora audiences actively resist, negotiate, or subvert this state-aligned media framing.

These dynamics necessitate a recalibration of postcolonial media critiques. While Western legacy media's reductive tropes of inherent tribalism persist (Ndlovu, 2021; Wasserman, 2020), the narrative proxy war in Sudan illustrates a rapidly decentering global information order. Gulf states, leveraging immense capital, have emerged as dominant narrators of Global South crises (Cherkaoui, 2021). The mediation of the Sudanese war is no longer solely dictated by Washington or London; it is fiercely contested by Abu Dhabi and Doha. Contemporary conflicts are thus mediated through a multipolar digital landscape, where journalism is continuously subjugated to competing geopolitical imperatives.

These findings have key implications for the evolving nature of digital geopolitical warfare. In contemporary African conflicts, the digital environment has become a critical front line where information is weaponized to launder reputations and obfuscate atrocities. As Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2015b) argue, modern conflicts are inextricably “mediatized,” meaning the struggle for narrative dominance is as consequential as kinetic warfare on the ground. The Sudan case highlights a paradigm shift in proxy warfare where the control of information is deployed to shield illicit supply chains and manage international optics (Prier, 2017; Rauta, 2020). Moreover, as regional powers in the Global South increasingly challenge Western media hegemony,

they leverage highly professionalized digital journalism to project an image of humanitarian benevolence while simultaneously pursuing disruptive geopolitical aims (Cherkaoui, 2021). This narrative competition results in a weaponized information ecosystem that not only complicates international diplomatic responses but also actively fuels domestic instability through coordinated disinformation and information suppression.

Looking ahead, the mediatization of the Sudan conflict suggests urgent avenues for future research. For instance, scholars may investigate the concept of digital sovereignty in the Global South, exploring how states navigate the tension between transnational narrative competition and local information control in fragile and volatile contexts (e.g., Chala & Workneh, 2026). Additionally, there is a critical need for the development of automated, large-scale narrative analysis tools capable of detecting real-time media manipulation and state-sponsored disinformation across multilingual digital ecologies.

Finally, future studies should examine the long-term impact of these mediated “narrative wars” on post-conflict reconstruction and the potential for digital diplomacy to move beyond mere soft power projection toward authentic peacebuilding. As critical media scholars have long argued, understanding the global framing of African crises is essential for deconstructing structural power inequalities (Bunce et al., 2016; Wasserman, 2018). Recognizing the digital dimensions of the Sudanese collapse is therefore not merely an academic exercise, but a necessary intervention for navigating the complex, mediatized landscape of twenty-first-century conflict.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data for this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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