



Dimensions
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Situation assessment



The Impact of the Conflict

Between the Army and Rapid Support Forces
on Sudan's Security and Stability

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Dimensions for Strategic Studies

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INTRODUCTION

The battle lines in Sudan were unmistakably drawn on the morning of April 15, 2023, as tensions reached a boiling point between Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the Sudanese army's chief.

The core of the disagreements centers around the future direction of Sudan and differing perspectives on the political transition. As Army Chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan endeavored to kickstart the transition and roll out a military and security reform, tensions with the RSF escalated.

Sudan's conflict swiftly intensified, adopting a pronounced ethnic and tribal character, highlighted by the clashes in El Genaina city, West Darfur. These confrontations, pitting Arab tribes allegedly aligned with the RSF against the Masalit ethnic group, resulted in over 1,000 fatalities. This escalating trend raises profound concerns, not just for Sudan's stability, but its very unity.

This study delves into the catalysts behind the outbreak of conflict in Sudan, shedding light on international ramifications. It further explores the conflict's impact on Sudan's stability and unity, while endeavoring to predict its eventual course.



FIRST: THE RAPID SUPPORT: GENESIS, ASCENDANCY, AND INFLUENCE

The Sudanese scene is no stranger to the utilization of militias, paramilitary formations, and irregular armed factions in its conflicts. Notably, unconventional forces played a pivotal role in the South Sudan civil war, which eventually led to the birth of a new state in the south. One such group was the Popular Defense Militia, previously leveraged by Omar al-Bashir in his battle against the southern rebels. This militia, however, met its end after announcing its insurrection in late 2019. ⁽¹⁾

Following the onset of the rebellion in Darfur in 2003, the government recurrently turned to armed militias, frequently leaning on them for various reasons. One primary factor was the guerrilla warfare strategy adopted by the rebel movements, characterized by a 'hit-and-run' approach, which often stymies traditional armies from securing decisive victories. Moreover, there was a looming apprehension about the potential fragmentation of the army if deeply embroiled in military confrontations, given the underlying ethnic, racial, and tribal dynamics.

Given the aforementioned considerations, the government founded several militias, notably the Janjaweed and the Border Guard Forces, which operated under the umbrella of the armed forces. Then, in 2013, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) emerged, amalgamating elements from the Janjaweed, Border Guard Forces, and other Darfur-based militias. Uniquely, the RSF was placed under the National Intelligence and Security Service, spearheaded by Brigadier Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti. This was a precedent-setting move, bestowing a militia leader with an official military rank.

(1) Popular Defense Militia threatens to burn Sudan, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat newspaper, November 8, 2019, [Link](#)



After their inception, the RSF played a crucial role in significant battles, notably the Battle of Goz Dungu, and clashes with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in both the Blue Nile and South Kordofan regions. In 2017, the Sudanese Parliament enacted a law formally acknowledging the RSF as a national entity. This legislation granted them autonomy while positioning them under the broader umbrella of the armed forces, ensuring they adhere to its overarching principles.⁽²⁾

Undeniably, the regional and international influences have played a pivotal role in the ascent and legitimization of the RSF. Their significant efforts in combating cross-border organized crimes, such as human trafficking and illegal migration, especially in the Sahara following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in October 2011, cannot be understated. Moreover, their active involvement in Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen alongside the Arab Coalition in 2015 further underscores their prominence. The rise of the RSF is also intrinsically linked to the internal power dynamics within the Sudanese government.⁽³⁾

Dagalo, better known as Hemedti, was a central figure in the negotiations that culminated in the signing of the constitutional document in August 2019. Hemedti, the leader of the RSF, also played a crucial role in advancing the talks held in Juba, the capital of South Sudan. These talks led to a landmark Sudanese peace agreement in October 2020, brokered between the transitional government and various armed factions, including the Justice and Equality Movement, the Sudan Liberation Army under Minni Arko Minawi, and the Sudanese Alliance of Liberation Movements. Beyond his political influence, Hemedti carved out an economic stronghold, dominating gold trade and overseeing mines in areas like Jebel Amer, Sango, the Nile, Blue Nile, and South Kordofan. His reach also extends to a network of construction and contracting enterprises.

(2) Rapid Support Forces in Sudan, Encyclopedia / Al Jazeera. Net May 15, 2023,[Link](#)

(3) A war of words between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces, Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, February 27, 2023,[Link](#)



SECOND: POINTS OF DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN THE RSF AND THE ARMY.

In June 2021, the resigned Sudanese Prime Minister, Abdullah Hamdok, launched an initiative to safeguard the civil democratic transition path. He emphasized the need to reform the security and military apparatus and overcome points of contention. Subsequently, a framework agreement was signed in December 2022 between the RSF and the army on one side, and the political forces represented by the "Forces of Freedom and Change Central Council" on the other. One of the key provisions of this agreement is a plan for security and military reform, which is supposed to be discussed in a conference attended by political, civil forces, and armed movements that signed the Juba Peace Agreement. The agreement also includes the integration of the army, the RSF, and the armed movements, with the head of state being the commander of the army.⁽⁴⁾

The agreement did not specify a timeline, nor did it define clear mechanisms for integrating the RSF into the army or who would lead this process. Subsequently, the army commander, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, moved to establish the Supreme Council of the Army and Armed Forces under his leadership. The council is to include the commander of the RSF, the Director-General of the Police, and the Director-General of the Intelligence Service, with the Chief of Staff of the army serving as the council's chairman. The council will continue until an agreement is reached on a prime minister, as stipulated in the agreement.

It seems that Hemedti, as the commander of the RSF, interpreted these steps taken by the army commander as an attempt to diminish his own influence, by undermining the Sovereignty Council through which Hemedti operates. This perception was particularly reinforced as these measures coincided with the cessation of security and field reports from intelligence reaching Hemedti, further solidifying his belief that there's an intent to target his presence in the Sudanese scene.⁽⁵⁾

(4) The signing of the framework agreement to resolve the Sudanese crisis, and these are its details, Al Arabiya Net, December 5, 2022, [Link](#)

(5) Sources reveal to Al-Jazeera Net the reasons for the dispute between Al-Burhani and Hamidti, Al-Jazeera Net, February 21, 2023, [Link](#)



Most likely, the integration of the RSF implies that Hemedti and his subordinate leaders would lose the gains accumulated since the latter days of the ousted president Omar al-Bashir. Additionally, this move exposes Hemedti to potential risks, such as the possibility of being prosecuted on charges related to crimes and violations in Darfur, the Blue Nile, and the dispersal of the 2019 General Command sit-in.



THIRD: THE EXTERNAL ROLE

Arab countries, such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, are perceived as allies to the overall ruling military forces in Sudan, led by both Burhan and Hemedti. Therefore, the positions of these countries vary in the event of a disagreement between the two men.

1. EGYPT

It is believed that Egypt, in particular, is among the foremost allies of the military establishment. As a result, the RSF besieged the Egyptian forces stationed at the Merowe military airport before the outbreak of armed confrontations, aiming to reduce the effectiveness and neutralize the Egyptian Air Force in case Egypt decided to support and back the Sudanese army. ⁽⁶⁾

It is crucial for Egypt to secure the official Sudanese stance's endorsement in the context of the conflict with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), ensuring Cairo's defense of its water and food security by jointly pressuring Ethiopia with Sudan to slow down the dam's filling process.

Egypt aims through its rapprochement with Sudan to resolve the border dispute over the Hala'ib Triangle. Additionally, Sudan's stability is vital for Egypt, which is concerned about the exacerbation of security conditions in the region at large. ⁽⁷⁾

⁽⁶⁾ Adviser to the commander of the RSF reveals the fate of the Egyptian soldiers detained at the Marawi military base, Al Jazeera Net, April 18, 2023, [Link](#)

⁽⁷⁾ Khaled Mahmoud, what does Sisi want from Sudan? Carnegie Center, February 14, 2019, [Link](#)



2. THE UAE

The relationship between the UAE and the commander of the RSF is unique. The value of gold exports from the RSF to the UAE annually amounts to 16 billion US dollars, with Hemedti and his family controlling the gold mines in Darfur through the Al-Junaid company. ⁽⁸⁾

The UAE is keen on having influence in Sudan due to its maritime navigation significance. Dubai Ports World is interested in acquiring Port Sudan, Sudan's largest port located on the Red Sea coast. ⁽⁹⁾

Furthermore, the UAE views Sudan as part of its strategy to ensure food supply security. Consequently, Abu Dhabi has directed efforts towards establishing agricultural projects in coordination with businessmen close to the military establishment. They have also formed partnerships with the RSF for cooperation on regional security issues. ⁽¹⁰⁾

3. SAUDI ARABIA:

Saudi Arabia is interested in Sudan for security and economic reasons, and thus has established investments in region across Sudan over the past two decades, valued at up to 35.7 billion US dollars. ⁽¹¹⁾

Saudi Arabia has set up numerous agricultural projects in Sudan, aiming to achieve greater stability in food security in the medium and long term. Additionally, it's essential for Riyadh to maintain significant influence on the Red Sea coasts to securely facilitate the passage of oil exports through the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

Beyond security and economic considerations, there's a political dimension to Saudi Arabia's interest in Sudan. Riyadh seeks to intervene in the ongoing conflict between the belligerents in Sudan. Riyadh aims to demonstrate its capability to resolve regional disputes and, through its mediation role, reaffirm its influence and seemingly maximize its impact. Saudi Arabia ensures its interests by maintaining a balanced approach with various parties. In this context, Saudi Arabia's hosting of the conflicting Sudanese parties in Jeddah aims to sponsor a solution to the Sudanese crisis.

⁽⁸⁾ Sudanese gold in the hands of RSF, Arabi Post, February 13, 2020, [Link](#)

⁽⁹⁾ Dubai Ports Company owned by Washington in Sudan, Al Jazeera Net/ Al Monitor, January 11, 2020. [Link](#)

⁽¹⁰⁾ The UAE seizes a giant agricultural project in Sudan, The New Arab, November 2022, [Link](#)

⁽¹¹⁾ Saudi Arabia, UAE Top Gulf Investments in Horn of Africa. alsharq al'awsat.3 April 2022. [Link](#)

4. RUSSIA

Sudan's geographical location holds particular significance. Thus, Russia sought closer ties with Omar al-Bashir's government since 2017, aiming to establish a logistical support center for the Russian naval fleet in the Red Sea. Russia was keen on strengthening relations with the authorities that succeeded after the ousting of Omar al-Bashir, trying to tie them with agreements that ensure military equipment supply to Sudan in exchange for the establishment of a Russian base on the Red Sea.⁽¹²⁾

In February 2022, Russia hosted the commander of the RSF, Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, for a week. Dagalo expressed his consent to establish a Russian military base in Sudan as long as it serves the country's interest and does not threaten its national security.⁽¹³⁾

During the recent crisis, Russian interest in Sudan was evident through its immediate calls for a ceasefire and conflict resolution⁽¹⁴⁾. In a clear expression of Russia's desire to engage in the Sudanese file, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov explicitly announced in April 2023 Sudan's right to benefit from the services of the private security company Wagner. Wagner remained a symbol of Russian foreign expansion⁽¹⁵⁾ until the group's rebellion against the Russian Defense establishment in June 2023.

5. ISRAEL

In 2019, Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo signed a 6 million US dollars- contract with a public relations company owned by Ari Ben Menashe, a former Israeli intelligence officer. The latter has close ties with lobbying groups in Canada. Some reports suggest that Ben Menashe works on behalf of the Sudanese RSF within Israeli and international institutions. In November 2022, reports indicated that the Rapid Support Forces acquired modern espionage systems and technologies from Israel. They also confirmed that the RSF are among the main supporters of the normalization path and the signing of the Abraham Accords between Sudan and Israel.⁽¹⁶⁾

(12) Russia is in the process of establishing a logistics center for its naval fleet in Sudan, Russia Today, November 11, 2020,[Link](#)

(13) Hemedti: We do not mind the establishment of a Russian base that does not threaten our national security, Asharq Al-Awsat, March 2, 2022,[Link](#)

(14) The Russian Foreign Ministry urges the parties to the Sudanese conflict to immediately implement a ceasefire, Sputnik, April 27, 2023, [Link](#)

(15) Russia authorizes Wagner's intervention in Sudan, Asharq Al-Awsat, 26 April 2023,[Link](#)

(16) How Israel benefits from the Sudan crisis, Noon Post, May 25, 2023,[Link](#)



At the beginning of 2023, Israeli Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid made a visit to Khartoum and met with the head of the army, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. This was preceded by a summit between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and General al-Burhan.

Israel places special importance on the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region, including Sudan, for security and economic reasons. It constantly seeks to extend its influence within this strategic region.⁽¹⁷⁾

6. THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The American positions have varied since the outbreak of the recent conflict in Sudan. On April 15, 2023, US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken confirmed that he had consulted with the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and the UAE regarding the clashes in Sudan, agreeing on the necessity for the parties to end hostilities unconditionally.⁽¹⁸⁾

On May 4, 2023, the White House announced that President Joe Biden issued an executive order allowing for sanctions against individuals "destabilizing" Sudan. Biden stated that the conflict in Sudan threatens international security.⁽¹⁹⁾

It's evident that Washington fears Russia's exploitation of this conflict to increase its influence through the involvement of Russian private security companies, which are used as a tool to extend Russian influence abroad; especially since Washington aims to reduce Russian influence in Africa and urges Libyan parties to abandon the Wagner Group. Thus, Washington would not welcome any Russian expansion towards a new African country.⁽²⁰⁾

America's participation alongside Saudi Arabia in an initiative to resolve the conflict in Sudan and halt the fighting is a clear indication of American interest in Sudan. Washington is trying to push towards a ceasefire using the tool of imposing sanctions on Sudanese individuals involved in violence.⁽²¹⁾

(17) Adnan Abu Amer, The Israeli Road Map in the Horn of Africa, Dimensions Center for Strategic Studies. [Link](#)

(18) US-Emirati-Saudi agreement on the necessity of ending the fighting in Sudan, Sky News, April 16, 2023, [link](#)

(19) Biden issues an executive order imposing sanctions on destabilizing Sudanese figures, Al Jazeera, May 4, 2023. [Link](#)

(20) U.S. Warns Sudan's Warring Generals Against Hiring Wagner Mercenaries, newsweek, 3 May 2023, [Link](#)

(21) Washington announces new sanctions against Sudan, eronews, June 1, 2023. [Link](#)



FOURTH: SIGNS THREATENING THE UNITY OF THE CURRENT SUDAN

Clashes between the Sudanese army and the RSF began in April 2023 in the neighborhoods of the capital, Khartoum. However, they became more complicated and spread to other areas such as the Darfur region. The conflict took on an ethnic dimension after confrontations between Arab tribes and the Masalit ethnic group in the city of El Genaina, the capital of Dar Masalit. The Sultanate of Dar Masalit was established in this city and joined Sudan in 1919.

The Masalit accuse the Arab tribes of being biased and collaborating with the RSF. On the other hand, the Arabs believe that the military intelligence affiliated with the Sudanese army is sending weapons to the Masalit. As a result, the confrontations over the course of May and June 2023 led to the death of more than 1,000 people and forced approximately one million to displace from the West Darfur state.⁽²²⁾

Sultan of Dar Masalit, Saad Abdel Rahman Bahr al-Din, after leaving El Geneina, hinted at the possibility of secession from Sudan. He issued a statement in which he confirmed that they are in the process of reviewing the "Qalani" agreement, under which Dar Masalit joined Sudan.⁽²³⁾

There are legitimate concerns about the repetition of the South Sudan model in West Darfur state, especially given the ethnic and tribal diversity of the state and the presence of extensive international interventions. Currently, Chad is hosting the displaced people from El Geneina due to the shared ethnic and tribal ties.

(22) Ethnic conflict turns the Sudanese city of El Geneina into ashes, The Independent Arabic, June 21, 2023, [Link](#)

(23) Is there a common fate between South Sudan and Darfur? The Independent Arabic, 24 June 2023 [Link](#)

FIFTH: FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR THE CONFLICT

In light of the above, the following scenarios for the conflict in Sudan can be predicted:

1. The victory of the Sudanese army over the RSF

This scenario is not ruled out for several reasons, including the firepower superiority of the Sudanese army compared to the RSF; especially since the army possesses aviation, artillery, and armored vehicles, in addition to ammunition manufacturing factories.

If the army decisively wins the confrontation, it will proceed to integrate the remnants of the RSF into the official institution, but under stricter conditions than before the confrontations. It is then likely that the army will push for a transitional government in which various Sudanese factions participate, excluding the National Congress, or it will form a non-partisan national competence government, considering it will become the main actor on the scene.

Although this scenario is not ruled out, it is not likely, given the maneuvering margin enjoyed by the Rapid Support Forces, including tribal support in some areas, possession of financial resources that allow them to recruit mercenaries, and the foreign relations of its leader.

2. Reaching a political solution without a military resolution

American" efforts might succeed, which have managed to push for a temporary truce twice since the launch of the joint bilateral initiative in May 2023. On the other hand, the African Union, after the meeting of the African Peace and Security Council, seeks to establish a new platform to resolve the Sudanese crisis with support and endorsement from the African Union, IGAD, the Arab League, the United States, and the European Union.

It is not unlikely that proposals will be presented related to imposing the principle of stepping down for the leadership of the army and the RSF and integrating the remnants of the latter into the army in accordance with the United Nations rules related to integration and demobilization. The political forces will be present and supportive of this proposal, as the recent proposals of the African Union emphasized the need to involve civilians and implement the political process, which means returning to the agreement. For this scenario to materialize, it is essential to unify international initiatives, and influential countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia must exert pressure on the parties to commit to the roadmap, with the necessity of setting a timeline for its implementation. Otherwise, it can be expected to return to military confrontations at any moment, even if a ceasefire is reached without an agreement on a solution.

3. Continuation of confrontations with shared control

It is likely that confrontations between the two sides will persist, with a gradual trend towards sharing geographical control. The Sudanese army would remain in control of the capital, especially since the RSF were unable to maintain their control over the presidential palace and the general command site of the army. In contrast, the RSF will focus their strength in the border areas adjacent to Chad, Libya, and Central Africa. They will try to exploit racial and ethnic contradictions, as happened in West Darfur state, pushing for confrontations between the Arab tribes and the Masalit people. This option will ensure that the RSF secure more external support and supply lines, allowing them to strengthen their position against the army, prolong the war, and ensure the army doesn't decisively defeat them until a solution is reached in which Hemedti participates as a main party. In fact, we might witness a new division scenario similar to what happened in South Sudan if a political solution ensuring Sudan's unity is not reached.

This scenario is considered the most likely, whether the de facto control and conflict continue without division, or with some components, such as Dar Masalit, declaring separation due to the events in West Darfur state.



CONCLUSION

Despite international attempts to halt the conflict in Sudan, most notably the initiative launched by both Saudi Arabia and the United States at the beginning of May 2023, which succeeded in pressuring the parties to commit to a temporary truce. However, it does not seem that the conflict is likely to end in the near future. The truce barely held before collapsing at the beginning of June, with the parties ignoring the U.S. threats of imposing sanctions.





What complicates the conflict and suggests its continuation are foreign interventions, in addition to its ethnic dimension. Some ethnicities, like the Masalit, believe that the RSF adopt a racist approach in the country.

The above expectation does not deny that the parties might occasionally agree on temporary truces. However, tribal and ethnic confrontations seem to weaken the role of military institutions and gradually reduce their ability to control the conflict. This trajectory provides a fertile environment for strengthening the presence of militias in the scene and enhancing their influence.



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