



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 01 May 2024

# A Year of War: Conflict Transformations and Peace Prospects in Sudan

Unit for Political Studies

# A Year of War: Conflict Transformations and Peace Prospects in Sudan

Series: **Situation Assessment**

01 May 2024

## Unit for Political Studies

The Unit for Political Studies is the Center's department dedicated to the study of the region's most pressing current affairs. An integral and vital part of the ACRPS' activities, it offers academically rigorous analysis on issues that are relevant and useful to the public, academics and policy-makers of the Arab region and beyond. The Unit for Political Studie draws on the collaborative efforts of a number of scholars based within and outside the ACRPS. It produces three of the Center's publication series: Assessment Report, Policy Analysis, and Case Analysis reports. .

Copyright © 2024 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

[www.dohainstitute.org](http://www.dohainstitute.org)

# Table of Contents

|   |   |
|---|---|
| RSF Strategy .....                                  | 1 |
| RSF Strengths .....                                 | 2 |
| Failing Regional and International Mediations ..... | 2 |
| Domestic Dynamics .....                             | 3 |
| New SAF Strategy? .....                             | 4 |
| Conclusion .....                                    | 5 |



A year since clashes broke out between Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) militias, the Sudanese government has submitted a request for an emergency session of the UN Security Council. The government seeks to discuss “the UAE’s aggression against the Sudanese people, and the provision of weapons and equipment to the terrorist militia”,<sup>1</sup> in reference to the Rapid Support Forces led by Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, better known as Hemedti. The Sudanese complaint against the UAE coincided with the SAF advance on the ground in Khartoum, whereby the Sudanese engineer corps succeeded in breaking the siege on southern Omdurman and joining the SAF in Wadi Seidna to the north. This enabled the SAF to widen the scope of its control in Omdurman’s old neighbourhoods, retaking the national TV and radio headquarters. This marks a remarkable transformation in the dynamics of the conflict with RSF, which made significant gains in recent months vis-a-vis the SAF.

## RSF Strategy

Since the overthrow of the Bashir regime in April 2019, RSF leader, Hemedti, has expanded his influence, becoming the second deputy chairman of the Council of Governors as part of the transitional agreement in July 2019.<sup>2</sup> Since then, Hemedti has steadily built up his military capacity by establishing camps, seen in satellite imagery, carefully distributed around the capital in the aim of encircling Khartoum.<sup>3</sup> In the capital itself, the RSF were concentrated in or around many facilities and vital services, such as the Presidential Palace, the national TV and radio headquarters, Khartoum airport, and the main bridges in the capital.<sup>4</sup> This strategic positioning contributed to RSF field advances when the conflict with the SAF broke out in April 2023.

RSF strategy to control Khartoum at the onset of the conflict were implemented in three stages: Initially, it carried out a blitzkrieg assault to seize key sovereign state institutions, such as the locations mentioned above, but it failed to fully control the SAF General Command building. The Presidential Guard successfully evacuated of the SAF commander and head of the Sovereignty Council, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, impeding an RSF victory. In the second phase, the RSF attempted to disrupt SAF movements by deploying its forces within residential neighbourhoods in the five localities of Khartoum State, setting up sniper positions inside and above buildings, and preparing ambushes on main and subsidiary roads. This halted the flow of supplies to key SAF locations, including the General Command and Signal Corps buildings.<sup>5</sup> In the third stage, the RSF launched offensives to isolate the capital from

1 “Sudan demands emergency UN meeting on UAE ‘aggression’”, *The New Arab*, 28/4/2023, accessed on 21/3/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/px2wbr>

2 It was President Omar Bashir himself who assigned Hemedti RSF Commander in 2013

3 The RSF are stationed north of the capital at the Al-Jeili base, in the northwest at the Shahid Hamouda camp, in the west the Karari base, the Fatasha base and the Nusour combat camp, to the southwest at the Saliha base, to the south at the Taiba base, and to the east it at the Al-Nasr neighbourhood and Khawla bint Al-Azwar camps.

4 RSF holds 11 sites inside the capital, including, for example, Shambat on the edge of the Shambat Bridge, which connects the center of Omdurman and Bahri, the Iskala site near the Presidential Palace and the White Nile Bridge, which connects Omdurman (home to the Medical Corps, the Engineers Corps), Khartoum, the National Congress HQ, and the airport district, close the SAF General Command, the Guest House (HQ of Al-Burhan and senior state officials), and other sites.

5 “Fierce battles and the army says that its losses do not live up to RSF statements,” *Sudan Tribune*, 14/7/2023, accessed on 21/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/j5ewx>



neighbouring states and then moved to isolating SAF units from each other inside the capital. It took the initiative early on to isolate North Kordofan State and Darfur State, which constitute most of its social incubator.<sup>6</sup> After seven months of fighting, the RSF succeeded in seizing four out of five military garrisons in the Darfur region and the entire Gezira state following a sudden SAF withdrawal.

## RSF Strengths

The RSF exploited the characteristics of urban warfare at an operational level to drag the SAF into an unfamiliar combat environment that would minimize the advantages of their adversary. On the strategic level, several factors, most notably foreign support, played an important role in facilitating the RSF's continued combat capacity. Multiple reports, most notably the report of the United Nations Committee of Experts,<sup>7</sup> credit the UAE and the Wagner Company,<sup>8</sup> Russia's arm in Africa, with playing a major role in providing military support to the RSF, smuggled across Sudan's borders with Chad, the Central African Republic and Libya. This external support is linked to RSF economic activities, specifically gold trade with these parties. The UAE is the main supplier of weapons, with several shipments are unloaded weekly at an airport in eastern Chad, containing weapons, including man-portable air defence systems, drones, and various other ammunition and equipment, which are then transported in trucks across the border.<sup>9</sup> In August 2023, weapons were found on an Emirati cargo plane that was supposed to transport humanitarian aid to Sudanese refugees in Chad.

While using the countries of the African Sahel as a transit point for weapons and equipment, the RSF Commander took a diplomatic tour in the Horn of Africa and several other African countries. Months after the outbreak of the war, the RSF travelled to Ethiopia, Djibouti, Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, and Rwanda to hold meetings with leaders, sparking tensions between these countries and Sudan, which claims these meetings give Hemedti undeserved legitimacy. Al-Burhan expressed his dissatisfaction by saying: "Welcoming any (Sudanese) party [...] that does not recognize the existing government is considered hostility to the Sudanese state."<sup>10</sup>

## Failing Regional and International Mediations

Hemedti's foreign movements have had a negative impact on the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) initiative, as Khartoum rejected Kenya's presidency of the Quartet charged with resolving the crisis in Sudan, which consists of Kenya, Djibouti, South Sudan, and Ethiopia. A

<sup>6</sup> "Moment by moment...battles on several fronts in Sudan, and Biden orders the deployment of forces in anticipation of the evacuation of the Americans," *Al Jazeera*, 20/4/2023, accessed on 21/3/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/phsyt>

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, *UN Panel of Experts Report on Sudan* (New York: 15/1/2024), p. 13-14, accessed on 22/3/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/wvgyik>

<sup>8</sup> "Evidence of Russian Wagner arming Rapid Support Forces in Sudan," *CNN*, 21/4/2023, accessed on 22/3/2024, at: <https://short-link.me/yqqO>

<sup>9</sup> "United Nations Report Discloses UAE's Role in Supplying Weapons for Sudan War," *The Globe and Mail*, 24/1/2024, accessed on 24/1/2024, at: <http://doha-institute.org/Lww9>

<sup>10</sup> "A reception worthy of a president: Hemedti's foreign tours deepen the crisis in Sudan," *Al-Hurra*, 18/1/2024, accessed on 22/3/2024, at: <https://2u.pw/SvXBPYq>



statement issued by the Sudanese Foreign Ministry described Kenya as a non-neutral party.<sup>11</sup> Sudan also rejected IGAD's invitation to Hemedti to attend the heads of state summit held in Entebbe, which Sudan refused to participate in. On 20 January 2024, Sudan froze its membership in IGAD.

Before that, on 3 December 2023, Riyadh and Washington announced the suspension of the Jeddah negotiations indefinitely, due to the failure to implement confidence-building measures. These had included re-detaining representatives of the former regime who had escaped from prison, and ending the military presence in the cities according to arrangements to which both parties had committed.<sup>12</sup> The negotiations in Jeddah faltered due to two main factors: the first is the RSF's refusal to evacuate civilian facilities and stop military activities in the streets and urban areas, as their survival in these areas is considered part of their combat strategy based on urban warfare. The second is related to the involvement of military forces with Islamist orientations – among other groups – in fighting alongside the SAF,<sup>13</sup> impacting their response to the request to re-detain former regime affiliates.

In February 2024, the Bahraini capital, Manama, hosted talks between Lieutenant General Shams al-Din Khabbashi, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the SAF, and Abdulrahim Dagalo, Hemedti's brother, in the presence of officials from Egypt and the UAE, the main supporters of SAF and RSF, along with representatives from the United States and Saudi Arabia, but they did not yield results.<sup>14</sup>

## Domestic Dynamics

On 15 August 2023, Vice Chairman of Sudan's Sovereignty Council, Malik Agar, launched an initiative to resolve the Sudanese crisis, starting with a ceasefire and removal of the RSF from the residential areas in which they are garrisoned, then forming a caretaker government, and working with the political forces to create the conditions to hold a constituent assembly.<sup>15</sup> While the SAF did not express a specific position on the initiative, the RSF rejected the initiative. The Forces of Freedom and Change expressed reservations about the proposal to form a caretaker government, and the Islamic Movement rejected the initiative because it included an article stipulating its dismissal and the re-imprisonment of its leaders.

As part of its efforts to strengthen its position politically, on 3 January 2024, the RSF Commander-in-Chief signed an agreement known as the "Addis Ababa Declaration" with the newly formed civilian bloc, the Coordination of Civil Democratic Forces (Taqaddum), headed by former Prime Minister

<sup>11</sup> "Sudanese Foreign Ministry: The Government of Sudan rejects Kenya's presidency of the IGAD Quartet," *Sudan News Agency*, 7/9/2023, accessed on 22/3/2024, at: <https://2u.pw/bTO2Ozo>

<sup>12</sup> "Suspension of the Jeddah negotiations after the failure of the agreement to end military demonstrations and build confidence," *Sudan Tribune*, 3/12/2023, accessed on 22/3/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/1nud4>

<sup>13</sup> Following Burhan's call for popular mobilization on 27 June 2023, some citizens from different regions joined the army's training camps.

<sup>14</sup> Khalid Abdelaziz, "Sudanese Warring Parties Hold First High-Level Talks in Bahrain," *Reuters*, 31/1/2024, accessed on 22/3/2024, at: <https://2u.pw/2wsrK6l>

<sup>15</sup> "The Malik Agar Initiative in Sudan: Premises and Prospects for Solving the Conflict," Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 24/8/2023, accessed on 22/3/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/dpr859>



Abdalla Hamdok,<sup>16</sup> which included a cessation of hostilities and the delivery of humanitarian aid, and protection of civilians. However, the RSF did not adhere to what was stated in the declaration regarding stopping violations and delivering humanitarian aid. The agreement also impacted the legitimacy of the other signatories because of the Sudanese people's aversion to the RSF continuing to commit crimes against the residents of Gezira and Khartoum, as well as in the Darfur region.

In March 2024, Taqaddum, led by Agar, announced its intention to sign a political treaty with the SAF, as part of efforts to resolve the crisis and form an emergency government. Although the SAF did not issue an official position on the agreement, the appearance of the Taqaddum leadership in Omdurman, from which the RSF were expelled, and their meeting with senior operations officers at the Wadi Seidna military base, in addition to their meetings with Burhan and the head of the General Intelligence Service, suggests that the bloc enjoys the support of the army. The Taqaddum spokesman, Mustafa Tambour, expressed support of the army and rejected any political agreement with the RSF, which he accused of implementing a UAE plan to plunder Sudan's wealth.<sup>17</sup>

With the failure of mediation efforts, it seems that the two parties are betting on a field breakthrough that will break the deadlock in political efforts to resolve the crisis. The RSF rely on urban combat tactics, while committing grave violations against civilians, including identity-based killing, rape, and forced recruitment. Meanwhile, the SAF is hoping to take advantage of its position as the legitimate institution that enjoys popular support to confront a militia committing grave violations, to obtain new external support that will allow it to break the stalemate. This process appears to have begun with its penetration of the siege on the Engineers Corps.

## New SAF Strategy?

SAF operations were initially limited to directing air strikes, artillery shelling, and defending its headquarters. However, recently, the army carried out the first coordinated offensive operation during which it was able to break the siege on the Engineers Corps south of Omdurman, and succeeded in creating a breakthrough into the ranks of the RSF after weeks of street warfare.<sup>18</sup> This allowed the forces of Wadi Seidna (north of Omdurman) to reach the Engineers Corps and bring in military reinforcements and food supplies. As a result, most of the neighbourhoods of Old Omdurman and those surrounding the national TV and radio headquarters were cleared.<sup>19</sup> The RSF found themselves under siege and attempted to withdraw from the radio and TV building to the west, but the army's drones dealt with the withdrawing forces. This marked the first time that the

<sup>16</sup> Taqaddam submitted an invitation to hold discussions with the SAF and RSF Commanders, to which Hemedti responded, but the Taqaddam delegation has not met with Burhan to date.

<sup>17</sup> "With an alliance supporting the army...is the formation of an emergency government in Sudan approaching?" *Al Jazeera*, 16/3/2024, accessed on 22/3/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/je4ul>

<sup>18</sup> "Heated confrontations between the army and the RSF in the vicinity of the Engineers Corps in Omdurman," *Radio Dabanga*, 9/1/2024, accessed on 22/3/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/n0lj9z>

<sup>19</sup> "Karari's forces clashed with the engineers for the first time during a siege that lasted 10 months," *Sudan News*, 16/2/2024, accessed on 22/3/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/kbyhs>



SAF used joint operations tactics in tight coordination, as the drone intervention was accompanied by an organized attack carried out by the infantry of the Engineers Corps, who were able to control the radio and television buildings.

The RSF had transformed the radio and television buildings into a leadership headquarters in central Omdurman, through which it controlled four roads of importance to the Sudanese army: Nile Street, Al-Mawradah Street, Al-Arbaeen Street, and Al-Bawaba Street. By retaking the buildings and those around them not only means imposing control over a geographical area, but also regaining control over these main roads. It restored the connection between the South Omdurman Military Regions (Engineers Corps) and Wadi Seidna Military Regions (North Omdurman) and reconnected the logistical supply lines between the two regions. It should be noted that the Rapid Support Forces still control large parts of the Ambda suburb, west of Omdurman, and Al-Salha, south of Omdurman, all the way to the Jebal Aulia reservoir, south of Khartoum.

The SAF shift from passive defence to offense was accompanied by its abandonment of caution in dealing with UAE support for the RSF, as it issued a number of sharp statements regarding UAE interference in Sudanese affairs, which were strongly expressed by a member of the Sovereignty Council and Assistant Commander-in-Chief, Lieutenant General Yasser Al-Atta.<sup>20</sup> In December 2023, Sudan asked 15 Emirati diplomats to leave the country. This coincided with the outbreak of demonstrations in the city of Port Sudan demanding the expulsion of the Emirati ambassador, before the Sudanese government decided to file a complaint against the UAE in the Security Council, claiming that “the UAE’s support for the criminal Rapid Support militia that waged war on the state makes the UAE an accomplice in all its crimes”.<sup>21</sup>

The SAF also benefited from the announcement by a number of armed movements that signed the Juba Peace Agreement that they would engage in fighting alongside it after being encouraged by its performance in Omdurman.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

For the first time since the outbreak of conflict between the SAF and the RSF militias last year, the SAF appears to be in a position where it can change the situation on the ground. It has an opportunity to invest in the recent progress it achieved in Omdurman to carry out similar offensive operations and break the siege on the rest of its main positions in Khartoum. In order to maintain its advance position and prevent the RSF from carrying out a counterattack, the SAF will attempt to neutralize the RSF defensive depth in the areas west of Omdurman with RSF presence, as well as to control

<sup>20</sup> “Al-Atta attacks the UAE leadership again and accuses it of causing the war,” *Sudan Tribune*, 19/3/2024, accessed on 22/3/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/1ivvu>

<sup>21</sup> Abdel Hamid Awad, “Sudan requests an emergency session of the Security Council regarding the UAE’s support for the Rapid Support Forces,” *The New Arab*, 27/4/2024, accessed on 22/3/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/vzBX2>

<sup>22</sup> Muzdalifah Othman, “Does the participation of Darfur movements in the war tip the scales in favour of the Sudanese army?”, *Al Jazeera*, 27/3/2024, accessed on 26/4/2024, at: <https://2u.pw/OPRu4Elw>





the entrance to the city from the western side towards the Darfur region, which is considered the main artery supplying the RSF with fighters and weapons. The SAF's military progress has been accompanied by political movement that aims to take advantage of the international community's rejection of regional parties' (especially the UAE and Russia) pursuit of their economic and geopolitical interests by supporting the RSF as it continues to commit serious humanitarian crimes.