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# Sudan Forces' Rivalry Plunges into Violence: What Now?

Unit for Political Studies

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## Unit for Political Studies

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After months of tension and hostile public statements, on April 15 the rivalry between Sudan's army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary group degenerated into armed clashes. The fighting started in the capital Khartoum and quickly spread to other cities, killing around 300 people and wounding 3,000 in the first five days alone, according to the World Health Organization.<sup>1</sup> The clashes were the result of a bitter power struggle between the army command, headed by General Abdulfattah Al-Burhan, and the RSF, formed in 2013 and led by Mohammad Hamdan Daglo (Hemedti). The immediate cause was a dispute over the timeline for integrating the RSF into the armed forces, a key sticking point in negotiations following last December's Framework Agreement,<sup>2</sup> which set out a roadmap for resolving the political crisis following the October 2021 coup against then-Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok. But the clashes reflect a deeper struggle for power and resources between the two main military forces in the country, as well as their respective foreign backers.

## What Triggered the Fighting?

The long-expected clashes flared after the RSF seized an airbase in Marawi, north of Khartoum. The Sudanese Armed Forces issued a statement, on April 13, saying that the RSF was mobilising across Khartoum without getting permission from, or even coordinating with, the army.<sup>3</sup>

The rivalry between the two forces had been on display since the formation of the Sovereign Council, which took power in the transitional period following the overthrow of longtime president Omar Al-Bashir in April 2019. Burhan, as head of the army, was appointed president of the council, with Hemedti as his deputy. Their differences started emerging after the army, backed by the RSF, decided to dissolve the joint military-civilian council, sack interim Prime Minister Hamdok and seize direct power in the coup d'état of 25 October, 2021.

Each then started forming its respective alliances with equally divided civilian political forces. Hemedti sought to distance himself from the October coup, portraying himself as a supporter of a transition to civilian rule and attempting to restore his reputation, damaged by his role in the Darfur conflict and in the massacre of protestors outside army headquarters in Khartoum in June 2019. In February, Hemedti also publicly accused Burhan of attempting to co-opt forces linked to the old regime.<sup>4</sup>

Burhan responded by warning the RSF against acting independently of the army, and ordered it to speed up its integration into the latter.<sup>5</sup> That moved the integration process to centre stage in their power struggle. On December 5, the army, RSF and civilian forces signed a Framework Agreement

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1 Jessie Yeung et al., "Clashes Re-erupt in Sudan, Hours after Truce Went into Effect," *CNN*, 19/4/2023, accessed on 20/4/2023, at: <https://cnn.it/3H0IbMG>

2 "Joint Statement by the Quad and Troika, Media note," U.S. Department of State, 5/12/2022, accessed on 18/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/41FFLe2>

3 "Statement from the Sudanese armed forces," Sudanese News Agency (SUNA), via Youtube, 13/4/2023, accessed 18/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/40It3A6>

4 "Mohammad Hamdan Daglo: Deputy President of the Military Council Describes the Coup as a Mistake," BBC Arabic, 20/2/2023, accessed 18/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bbc.in/40hxKlp>

5 Ibid.



laying out a two-year civilian-led transition towards elections and a timetable for further negotiations. Hemedti now moved to support the demands of civilian political forces, in order to win political allies who would also oppose Burhan and the army command. This included supporting calls for the army to withdraw from the political process and backing the formation of a civilian government, as stipulated in the Framework Agreement.<sup>6</sup> But Burhan conditioned the army's support for such a deal on the RSF's integration into the national armed forces, as a matter of urgency.<sup>7</sup>

At the last workshop of Phase Two in the negotiations under the Framework Agreement, set to discuss "Security and Military Reform", the Sudanese armed forces did not send a representative. This was seen as reflecting the army command's opposition to the direction the negotiations were taking, especially as regards the timeline for integrating the RSF into the army. The RSF was proposing a 10-year timeline, while the army was pushing for the process to last a maximum of two years, meaning it would be completed by the end of the latest transitional period.<sup>8</sup> For his part, Hemedti had demanded prior to the meeting that the issue of security and military reform be removed from the agenda, a move was seen as a rejection of his forces' integration into the army at all,<sup>9</sup> in order to preserve his independence and keep his economic power out of the army's reach. This appears to have been the trigger that turned the rivalry into outright violence.

The army appears to have been generally displeased with the Framework Agreement, which limited its involvement in politics and gave civilians much greater powers and ultimate authority over the armed forces. Paragraph 14 of the agreement's General Principles holds that "the transitional authority is a fully civilian, democratic authority in which military forces play no part". In Article 4, which covers state institutions, Paragraph 2 stipulates that "the head of state is the supreme commander of the armed forces". Paragraph 5 of the same section bans the armed forces from "all commercial and investment activities, except those related to arms production and military tasks", as well as subjecting all military-owned firms to oversight by the finance ministry.

This means that the Framework Agreement strips the military of its political power and the economic resources it managed independently of the government, even if the deal does allow for the Council of Ministers to involve the military in non-military matters.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, despite signing it along with civilian political parties, the army was suspicious of the Framework Agreement; unlike the RSF, which tried to use the deal to gain ground against the army. In essence, this amounted to a power struggle between military forces, each capitalising on divisions among civilians. Nobody appeared to realise that a stable state was dependent on having a single army - a condition for any democratic transition.

<sup>6</sup> "Hmedti and Burhan: the Military Split That Could Determine Sudan's Destiny," Mohammad Al-Arabi, Al-Jazeera, 30/3/2023, accessed 18/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/3KPSynu>

<sup>7</sup> "Al-Burhan: Nobody Can Defeat The Army, and Implementing the Framework Agreement Depends on Integrating the RSF," Al-Jazeera, 16/2/2023, accessed 18/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/40rzNNe>

<sup>8</sup> "Sudan: Will the Army's Withdrawal from the 'Security Reform' Process Stand in the Way of a Final Agreement?" Alaraby Aljadeed, 31/3/2023, accessed 19/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/41GxNBp>

<sup>9</sup> "Security Reform Workshop Starts in Sudan. Burhan: the Army Must Come Under Civilian Authority," 26/3/2023, accessed 19/4/2023: <https://bit.ly/3LcVH20>

<sup>10</sup> "The Text of the Framework Agreement Between Civilian and Military Forces in Sudan," Anadolu, 5/12/2022, accessed 18/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/43HD2mk>



## The Conflicting Positions of Sudan's Factions and Political Movements

Sudan's main political factions have taken divergent positions on the power struggle between the RSF and the army. Most have called for a ceasefire to drag the country back from the brink of a potentially long and devastating civil war, while some have stayed silent.<sup>11</sup> The Freedom and Change Forces (Central Council) issued a statement on the second day of fighting, calling for an immediate truce and a return to dialogue.<sup>12</sup> The Freedom and Change Forces (Democratic Bloc) said much the same thing.<sup>13</sup> The Democratic Alliance for Social Justice said in a statement that the Framework Agreement had caused the current crisis, as it failed to take into account the interests of the country's different political forces.<sup>14</sup> While the broad Islamist current did not make an official statement as a bloc, its president Mohammad Ali Al-Jazouli said on Facebook that he supported Sudan's armed forces against what he called "the agents of a foreign project".<sup>15</sup> The Future Movement for Reform and Development's secretary-general Hisham Uthman Al-Shawani issued a statement saying it supported "the people's armed forces against the rebel enemy" (i.e. the RSF), and said the country was in a "battle against a foreign plan to break up the country and the people's armed forces".<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the Alliance of Forces for Fundamental Change, which includes the Sudanese Communist Party and the Sudanese Professionals' Association (Defected Wing), the families of martyrs and the farmers' union of Jazeera province, said in a statement before the fighting broke out that it opposed military manoeuvring by both sides. It blamed the fighting on regional and international players, and said Sudan was seeing a struggle for resources and influence.<sup>17</sup> In a further statement on 15 April, it called for a ceasefire and blamed army command and the RSF for any civilian casualties.<sup>18</sup> The Central Committee of the Sudanese Communist Party called for an immediate ceasefire and for the army and RSF to withdraw from Sudanese cities.<sup>19</sup> The Resistance Coordination Committees (Khartoum Province) called both Burhan and Hemedti "enemies of the revolution" and urged them to avoid dragging the country into war.<sup>20</sup>

11 "Spokesman for the Political Process in Sudan: The Situation is Very Bad and The Fighting Has Shown that the Solution Must Be Political," Al-Jazeera, 17/4/2023, accessed 18/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/3opZ4tO>

12 "Freedom and Change: Pending Issues Cannot Be Resolved Through War," 18/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/41ihFXj>

13 "Sudan: Continuing Clashes Between the Army and the RSF, Dozens of Casualties," "Freedom and Change Forces (Democratic Bloc): We Call for an Immediate Ceasefire to Save Sudanese Blood," Al-Jazeera, 17/4/2023, accessed 19/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/3mKGCeR>

14 "Democratic Alliance for Social Justice: Important Statement On The Military Clashes Between The Army and the RSF In Khartoum and Other Parts of the Country," Democratic Alliance for Social Justice, Facebook, 15/4/2023, accessed 19/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/3oe99tx>

15 Mohammad Ali Al-Jazouli, Facebook, 15/4/2023, accessed 19/4/2023: <https://bit.ly/3Ate8tv>

16 "Future Movement for Reform and Development: Position Statement," Future Movement for Reform and Development, Facebook, 15/4/2023, accessed 19/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/3AaUBxO>

17 "A Statement on the Political Situation," Alliance of Forces for Fundamental Change, Facebook, 14/4/2023, accessed 19/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/3GUssyt>

18 "Urgent Press Statement," Alliance of Forces for Fundamental Change, Facebook, 15/4/2023, accessed 19/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/3LIC5Jv>

19 "Central Committee of the Sudanese Communist Party: A Statement to Our People," Sudanese Communist Party, Facebook, 15/4/2023, accessed 19/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/40iNcHi>

20 "Important Statement to the Sudanese People," Resistance Coordination Committees (Khartoum Province), 16/4/2023, accessed 18/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/3MOB1Pj>



Thus, in their positions on the conflict, Sudan's civilian political forces are not divided along the lines of secular vs. religious or left vs. right. Rather, they are divided among those who signed the Framework Agreement and those who did not, whether leftist, Islamist or otherwise.

## The Positions of International Actors

At the time of writing, no regional state has publicly taken sides on the conflict in Sudan. Both Egypt and South Sudan rushed to offer to mediate an end to the fighting. Egypt and Saudi Arabia called for an urgent meeting of the Arab League to discuss the crisis.<sup>21</sup> Both countries have a major interest in Sudan's stability. Saudi Arabia is the biggest foreign investor in the country, particularly in the agricultural sector.<sup>22</sup> Egypt, which depends heavily on the Nile, sees its upriver neighbour as strategically vital, especially regarding Khartoum's position in the dispute over Ethiopia's Great Renaissance Dam. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, for his part, also called for a ceasefire and a return to dialogue, as well as offering to mediate.<sup>23</sup>

Further afield, the European Union called for an end to the fighting and for dialogue between the two sides.<sup>24</sup> After its ambassador was attacked in Khartoum, it also called for diplomatic installations to be protected in accordance with international law.<sup>25</sup> The EU is particularly concerned about the situation in Sudan, fearing the fighting could spark a new wave of desperate migrants to head for its shores. The RSF had played a big role in preventing migrants from crossing the desert between Sudan, Libya and Chad, in exchange for EU financial support.<sup>26</sup>

As for the United States, Secretary of State Antony Blinken called both sides to urge them to stop fighting and to protect diplomatic missions, especially after an American diplomatic convoy came under fire, apparently from the RSF.<sup>27</sup> But it remains unclear whether Washington has picked a side, given Hemedti's ties with the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group.

China has also called for an end to fighting as soon as possible and has warned against escalation.<sup>28</sup> While the secession of South Sudan meant that Khartoum is no longer a major supplier of oil to China, Beijing remains a major economic partner and is a major investor in many sectors, particularly

<sup>21</sup> "Egypt's Envoy to the Arab League: Egypt was not Slow in Offering Aid to its Brother Sudan," Youm7, 16/4/2023, accessed 18/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/3GRKq4E>

<sup>22</sup> "Political and Economic Aspects of Hamdok's Visit to Saudi Arabia," Monte Carlo Doualiya, 9/3/2023, accessed 19/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/41bYbn3>

<sup>23</sup> "Ethiopia Comments on the Fighting Between the Sudanese Army and the RSF," CNN Arabic, 16/4/2023, accessed 18/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://cnn.it/3omyIld>

<sup>24</sup> "Sudan: Statement by High Representative Josep Borrell Calling for an Immediate De-escalation of Conflict in Sudan," Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of the Sudan, 15/4/2023, accessed on 19/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3mONW9h>

<sup>25</sup> "Sudan Fighting: Blinken Says US Diplomatic Convoy Fired Upon," BBC, 18/4/2023, accessed on 19/4/2023, at: <https://bbc.in/3LaWsc5>

<sup>26</sup> Louise Sullivan, "Khartoum Process," *Migration-Control.info*, accessed on 19/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/43I3RXC>

<sup>27</sup> "In Talks with Burhan and Hemedti, Blinken Issues Warning After Fire on Diplomatic Convoy in Sudan," Al-Jazeera, 18/4/2023, accessed 19/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/3KPGTVH>

<sup>28</sup> "China Calls for Early End to Armed Conflicts in Sudan," *China Daily*, 16/4/2023, accessed on 19/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3L8T00z>

mining.<sup>29</sup> Russia too appears not to have picked a side for now, despite the close cooperation between the RSF and Wagner, which has focused on financing the RSF and securing exports of large quantities of gold and uranium from Sudan in support of Russia's efforts to stockpile precious metals and protect its economy from Western sanctions.<sup>30</sup> Moscow is also attempting to establish a military base on the Red Sea coast, a project strongly opposed by the West.

Israel, which also has strong relations with both sides, has limited its public actions to calling for an end to the fighting. It appears to have calculated that a major military conflict would delay the signing of a naturalisation deal with Sudan, which it hopes to secure before power is handed to a civilian administration.<sup>31</sup> Some Israeli officials however favour Hemedti, as he has strong ties to the Mossad.

## Conclusion

Sudan, which has long suffered from political and economic crises along with ethnic and tribal tensions, has now entered a new conflict, this time between the country's two main military forces. This is likely to have major implications, especially the fighting drags out and if regional or international powers intervene on one side or the other. This risks splintering the country apart and destroying a central state that is already facing tribal and ethnic conflicts in the east, west and Blue Nile state. It is clear that each of the two sides is attempting to win over international players. Hemedti is trying to portray himself as fighting on behalf of civilians forces against the army and its apparent allies in the Islamist camp, who used to support the Bashir regime. He has also tried to bring an international dimension to the conflict by claiming, on several occasions, that foreign jets had bombed his forces' positions.<sup>32</sup> On the other side, Burhan is portraying his fight as that of a state against a militia that would bring chaos. He is hoping this portrayal will appeal to Egyptian officials, who already seem uncomfortable with Hemedti and his regional network of relationships.

However these dynamics develop, unless one side wins a decisive victory or a truce is reached that can put Sudan's armed forces on the road to unification, prior to a transfer of power to a civilian administration, this conflict risks bringing further misery to a country that has suffered too much instability and poverty.

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29 Luke Patey & Eric Olander, "What's at Stake for China in Sudan?" Danish Institute for International Studies, 28/10/2021, accessed on 19/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3MWZlcw>

30 "Sudanese-Russian Proximity: Challenges and Risks," Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, 3/7/2023, accessed 19/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/41laVaS>

31 "Both Sides of the Conflict in Sudan had Contact with Israel," Alaraby Aljadeed, 16/4/2023, accessed 19/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/3A7PcaH>

32 "Hmeidti Briefs Blinken on RSF Efforts to Fight Extremism," Middle East Online, 18/4/2023, accessed 19/4/2023 (in Arabic): <https://2u.pw/qoBsmB>