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# The Sudanese Crisis:

## On the Field, Foreign Influences, and Projections

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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## Unit for Political Studies

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Four months on from the outbreak of fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Sudan is stuck in stalemate. The crisis began on 15 April 2023, when the RSF attacked the headquarters of the SAF base and other vital sites inside the capital, Khartoum, in an attempt to seize power.<sup>1</sup> That attack marked the beginning of a military confrontation between the two parties that would extend to regions in Darfur and parts of Kordofan.

## RSF's Changing Objectives

The main goal of the RSF, early in the fighting, was to quickly resolve the conflict with the SAF and seize power by taking control of the Republican Palace, radio and television buildings, Khartoum Airport, Meroe Airport, and other government facilities, in addition to the headquarters of the SAF. The RSF took action in Darfur, which is considered its major stronghold and a human reservoir, where it originated as the Janjaweed during the confrontation with other armed movements in the Darfur war (2002-2011). At the time, the Janjaweed was accused of committing grave violations against the civilian population. Battles also took place between the RSF and SAF the cities of Al Fashir, Nyala, Al Junaynah and Zalingei. The two sides currently share control in all of these cities, except for El Junaynah, which has been taken over by the RSF and an allied local militia.

After four months of fighting, a somewhat frustrated RSF is seeking to preserve its gains and improve its negotiating position by using its ability to move quickly to launch simultaneous attacks on military facilities, in an attempt to drain the SAF. It is also occupying citizens' homes, hospitals, and government facilities, such as water and electricity stations, and an oil refinery. These new tactics coincided with its looting and burning of public and private property, and the commission of grave violations against civilians, including rape and forced displacement.<sup>2</sup> By holding homes hostage, the RSF has made confronting it inside the capital extremely difficult.

The battles are currently concentrated in the three cities of the capital: Khartoum, Omdurman, and Khartoum North, with sporadic attacks on the cities of El Obeid and Umm Rawaba in Kordofan. A civil war is taking place in the capital, in which the army uses aviation to bomb RSF sites, including some captured public facilities, while conducting combing operations for neighbourhoods in the cities of Omdurman and Khartoum. Public facilities, especially hospitals and civilian homes, are used as shelters from the SAF air force and artillery attacks. The RSF relies mainly on snipers to secure control of most of the bridges connecting the three cities, while using targeting military sites belonging to the army. It seems that the deployment of the RSF in the three cities of the capital has become a burden due to the difficulty in securing supply lines and providing fuel and ammunition. In recent

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<sup>1</sup> Although the Rapid Support Forces deny that they initiated the attack and accuse what they called "remnants of the former regime" of attacking first, witness testimonies and media reports indicate that the RSFs initiated the fighting. See: Ariel Cohen, "Russia's fingerprints are on Sudan Coup Attempt," *The Hill*, 4/18/2023, accessed on 1/8/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc3nr7dn>; Colin Poitras, "Yale Humanitarian Research Lab Monitoring Conditions in Sudan," Yale School of Public Health, June 10, 2023, accessed on 1/8/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdf4db6h>;

<sup>2</sup> "Death Came to Our Home: War Crimes and Civilian Suffering in Sudan," *Amnesty International*, 3/8/2023, accessed on 3/8/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/ynrkvxwp>.



weeks, the RSF attacks have been less effective in comparison to the first weeks of the conflict. For now, it suffices with launching attacks using drones or missile strikes against SAF positions.

The RSF is seeking to keep its supply lines from outside Sudan open, especially from Libya, Central Africa and Uganda. US media has reported, based on field sources and analysis of satellite images, that retired Major General Khalifa Haftar and the Russian Wagner Group deployed in Libya and Central Africa have sent weapons supplies to the RSF. Planes were followed leaving the al-Khadim base, which is controlled by Haftar, in eastern Libya, to the Hmeimim airport in Syria, where Russia has a large military presence, before returning to the al-Khadim base, and then to an isolated place at the airport in the Al-Jafra region, central Libya. As a result, it will be delivered to the RSF inside Sudan. According to the same sources, the surface-to-air missiles used by the RSF at the beginning of the confrontations with the army were sent by Haftar.<sup>3</sup> This prompted the SAF to take control of the RSF Chevrolet base on the Sudanese-Libyan border to stop the infiltration of arms supplies. Other reports indicate the existence of a second supply route through the Central African Republic to Darfur, especially since the RSF controls the Am Dafok/Um Dafuq crossing between Sudan and Central Africa, indicating the influence of foreign factors in Sudan.<sup>4</sup>

## Foreign Influence

External interaction with the war in Sudan, especially regionally, varies between trying to stop the fighting and prevent the spread of chaos across the borders, to undeclared political and military support for one of the parties to the crisis. The UAE is the most prominent regional intervening party in Sudan. It has close relations with the RSF, part of which is employed by the UAE in the Yemen war. Abu Dhabi has various interests in Sudan, including in gold mines and the construction of the Abu Amama port on the Red Sea coast to consolidate its control over the ports of the region extending from the Horn of Africa to the Red Sea. Although the Sudanese government did not explicitly mention the UAE, it has accused foreign countries of supporting the RSF. The SAF had found Emirati weapons in the possession of those forces when they stormed some of their camps.<sup>5</sup>

The Gerjon air traffic monitoring website observed around 28 flights from the UAE via Entebbe in Uganda to Central Africa and Chad, from 16 May to 30 June 2023, with this air traffic reaching a peak of 4 flights per day. This indicates that the UAE has provided RSF with military equipment through the Wagner Group in the Central African Republic.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, US sources recently revealed that

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3 Nima Elbagir, et. al., "Exclusive: Evidence Emerges of Russia's Wagner Arming Militia Leader Battling Sudan's Army," *CNN*, 21/4/2023, accessed on 3/8/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2s3n5cuk>

4 Samira Elsaidi, "Libya's Haftar 'Rerouting' Supplies to Sudan's Rapid Support Forces," *Middle East Eye*, 10 July 2023, accessed on 3/8/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/46aun24h>

5 Campbell MacDiarmid, "Day-long Ceasefire Agreed in Sudan after Intense International Mediation," *The Telegraph*, 18/4/2023, accessed on 4/8/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4uxae9db>

6 Martin Plaut, "Strange flights from UAE via Uganda and on to the Central African Republic and Chad. What's happening?" *Martin Plaut*, 1/7/2023, accessed on 3/8/2023, at: <https://2u.pw/ecbgGG5>

Ugandan officials had found boxes of ammunition and assault rifles coming from the UAE, which had been listed in the plane's cargo manifest as foodstuffs and medical supplies sent to Sudan.<sup>7</sup>

While Emirati interests relate to influence inside Sudan through the RSF for Economic and geopolitical reasons, the UAE is also responding to claims by local political organizations and the RSF about the presence of Islamist forces within the SAF. These forces were the reason for rejecting the framework agreement and starting the war.<sup>8</sup> However, none of these forces can deny three basic facts: 1) It was the old (Islamist) regime that brought Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) to power, relied on him, and strengthened his forces; 2) Hemedti wanted to gain power, and for that purpose he was ready to enter in a marriage of convenience with civilian forces; and 3) His forces are committing crimes against civilians that have served to alienate the Sudanese people, including those affected by and opposed to the former regime.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia played an important role in the political process during the transitional period, both unilaterally and within the framework of the Quartet that included the US, UK and UAE, a group that was formed to organize the transitional period after the military and civilian dispute following the October 2021 coup. Through the "Jeddah platform", Saudi Arabia, with the participation of the United States, hosted several rounds of negotiations between the two disputing parties in Sudan. Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE are members of the Quartet, they have two conflicting visions in dealing with the Sudanese crisis. While the UAE supports the RSF, Saudi Arabia is closer to the passive Egyptian position, which is generally closer to the SAF.<sup>9</sup> Visions also differ regarding the situation in eastern Sudan, through the impact of what is going on there on Saudi national security, and as a matter of economic competition. The UAE is seeking to build the port of Abu Amama on the Red Sea, while Saudi Arabia is working to make the Red Sea the centre of its economic activity in accordance with Vision 2030.

Although Egypt is Sudan's immediate neighbour with which it shares historical ties, its role in the country has become marginal as it was excluded from the Quartet, and from any role in the Jeddah platform. Egypt has enjoyed a strong relationship with Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan and the SAF since the December 2018 uprising, undertaking joint military exercises, most notably, the "Nile Eagles" manoeuvres, run from Marawi Air Base in northern Sudan. The RSF arrested Egyptian soldiers when they occupied Marawi airport, and later released them. The Egyptian role was evident in the meeting organized in Cairo, titled "The Sudanese Dialogue", in February 2023. Various political forces participated, while the Central Council for Freedom and Change boycotted it. The Egyptian role was strengthened through a summit organized by Cairo with Sudan's neighbours last July, in which the participants rejected foreign interference in the

<sup>7</sup> "A U.S. Ally Promised to Send Aid to Sudan. It Sent Weapons Instead," *Wall Street Journal*, 10/8/2023, accessed on 14/8/2023, at: <http://bitly.ws/RLWn>

<sup>8</sup> See the statement of Yasser Arman, a leader in the Freedom and Change faction of the Central Council: "Yasser Arman: Rapid Support is a force to build the national army," Al-Jazeera - Sudan, Facebook, 3/9/2022, accessed on 4/8/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4mx4m2u8>

<sup>9</sup> Talal Mohammad, "How Sudan Became a Saudi-UAE Proxy War," *Foreign Policy*, July 12, 2023, accessed on 4/8/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/34sfsxp8>

country and stressed that what is happening in Sudan is a domestic matter that should not be fuelled from abroad. Meanwhile, the Central Council for Freedom and Change held a meeting in Cairo, on 24 - 25 July 2023, which helped alleviate any friction between the council and the Egyptian authorities after it boycotted the Sudanese dialogue held in Cairo in February 2023.

Meanwhile Chad, in the early days of the fighting, announced the closure of its borders with Sudan to prevent the war from spilling over, and to prevent the arrival of RSF supplies through its territory. However, this position may have changed since the visit of Chadian President Mohamed Idriss Deby to the UAE on 13 June 2023. The latter extended a loan of one and a half billion dollars to Chad, granted it military equipment, and opened an office for the coordination of foreign aid in the Amdjarass region on the Sudan-Chad border. On 6 August 2023, Chad hosted the first ministerial meeting for Sudan's neighbouring countries, aiming to propose ways out of the current Sudanese crisis.

Another regional role has emerged through Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Eastern Africa,<sup>10</sup> which formed a quartet committee to discuss the situation in Sudan, headed by Kenyan President William Ruto. The Sudanese delegation boycotted the committee's meetings because the Sudanese government accuses the head of the committee, Ruto, of establishing close relations with Hemedti. Ruto, when he was vice president, secretly visited Sudan in February 2020, touring gold-producing sites; This indicates his economic ties to the RSF, which controls gold production in Sudan. At the meeting on 10 July 2023, IGAD decided to request an East African Standby Force summit in order to consider the possibility of deploying the reserve force in Sudan in order to protect civilians, and to ensure the arrival of humanitarian aid. In a press conference following the Quartet meeting, Kenyan President Ruto and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed questioned the legitimacy of the Sudanese leadership. Ruto stated that a new Sudanese leadership was needed, while Ahmed claimed that there was a vacuum in the country's leadership, and called for a no-fly zone and the withdrawal of heavy artillery. The Sudanese government rejected these statements and subsequently limited the role of IGAD in resolving the crisis.

Western international powers, especially the US and UK, have focused their efforts on stopping the war through the Jeddah platform for negotiations that the US was running with Saudi Arabia, and by putting pressure on regional organizations such as IGAD and the African Union, in order to stop the war, and impose sanctions on businesses from both sides. Meanwhile, Russia announced that it is with the institutions of legitimate government after the visit of the Vice-President of the Sovereignty Council, Malik Agar.

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<sup>10</sup> A regional organization of eight countries from the Horn of Africa and East Africa.



## Projections for the Conflict

Although the current direction of the battles indicates that the SAF are in a stronger position, the confrontation may develop according to one of the following two scenarios:

- **Protracted war:** Battles could continue until the RSF is finally defeated in the cities of the capital and the major cities of Darfur. This scenario is supported by a group of SAF officers and some political forces that see the existence of the RSF, no matter how weak, as a direct threat to the Sudanese army and state. However, the economic, social and political cost of this scenario is significant and difficult to bear under the current circumstances.
- **Political solution:** Through external pressure on the SAF leadership, a solution that guarantees a political and military presence for the RSF could be settled, either as an independent force or as part of the army. However, this scenario faces challenges, the most important of which is the rejection of a number of SAF leaders, and the existence of a popular movement that refuses to reward the RSF with legitimacy after so many of its soldiers committed murders, rapes, and looting of homes and property.

In any case, Sudan's territorial unity, and the state's restoration of its legitimacy and sovereignty, will depend on rejecting the existence of any independent organized force that is equivalent to its strength or a source of competition (any militia or an armed faction supported from abroad). A consensus has taken root among the Sudanese, regional and international forces on this principle, and on the need to transfer power to civil institutions agreed upon and then democratically elected. Without this, any solution reached will be only temporary and liable to collapse as soon as the balance of power changes.