



The Uplifting Africa Program

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The War in Sudan



The Rapid Support Forces bomb Khartoum Photo Credit: AP

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General Commander Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, Photo Credit Uganda News.

Mid-June marks two months of war in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The violence, which shows no sign of ceasing, has displaced over five million people and caused an acute humanitarian crisis. The situation is becoming even bleaker for the pro-democracy movement that had successfully helped oust former dictator Omar al-Bashir in 2019 as neither warlord behind the two warring factions represents the interests of ordinary people. Although foreign actors have mostly stayed out of the conflict, widespread geopolitical interests in the region indicate that the eyes of many foreign powers are on Sudan. A look at Sudan's geostrategic position, the interests of regional players, and the two warlord's alliances, indicate that the war in Sudan runs a considerable risk of becoming a more significant proxy conflict.

The region of Darfur has historically been marginalized and attacked. In 2003, a group called the Darfur Liberation Front (or the Sudan Liberation Movement) launched an attack on the town of Golo to protest the government's disregard for the region and its non-Arab population. Then president Omar al-Bashir launched Arab militias (Janjaweed or the Popular Defense Forces) to fight against the rebels. This allowed the government forces to kill members of the African Fur

intentionally and systematically, Masalit, and Zaghawa ethnic groups who predominantly live in the Darfur region. Since then, the transitional governments and current government in Sudan never fully acknowledged or addressed the causes of the genocide that took place and the marginalization continued. The impacts of this can be seen in the current conflict with UN reports received of at least 13 mass graves built in the city of El Geneina in the Darfur region, which are believed to contain individuals part of the Masalit ethnic group killed in attacks by the RSF and other Arab militias. The International Criminal Court has launched an ongoing investigation but there is a need to keep an eye on the genocide brewing in the region and see interventions or the lack thereof from outside actors.

The men responsible for the fighting are Mohamed Hamdan “Hemedti” Dagalo of the RSF and Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the SAF. Initially, the two were allies when they successfully conducted a bloodless coup d’état against al-Bashir, who had lost the country’s trust after the succession of South Sudan in 2011 and the subsequent economic crisis. Al-Burhan, an army general under al-Bashir’s rule, became the country’s de facto head of state. However, the transitional government began to split in 2022 when al-Burhan’s promise to establish democracy was on the condition that the RSF, headed by Hemedti, would consolidate itself under the SAF. This proposal outraged Hemedti and eventually led to fighting in April when the RSF launched attacks on SAF bases in Khartoum and clashes broke out at the Presidential Palace and outside al-Burhan’s Khartoum residence.



Commander Rapid Support Forces (RSF) Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo

Photo Credit: Andolu Agency

The RSF, for its part, has deep historical roots as a secret business empire and al-Bashir's private security force, which has rendered it support from foreign actors in the early months of the war. When al-Bashir took power in 1989 he dissolved parliament, banned political parties, established Sharia law, and formed a band of personal militias that were then known as the Janjaweed militias led by Hemedti. In the early 2000s, al-Bashir used his militias to massacre non-Arab rebels from Darfur who wanted to split from the country, killing hundreds of thousands of Darfuris. In 2013, he rebranded the group as the RSF and it was uncovered that the organization was also behind lucrative business operations including capturing gold mines, smuggling, border control, offering its soldiers for hire in regional conflicts, and facilitating a gold trade with Russia and the UAE. One leaked document exposed the delivery of \$30 million worth of gold to Dubai on behalf of the company owned by Hemedti. Thus, both of these countries have interests in the war.

The UAE's position, however, is complicated by the fact that they also have relations with the SAF which has guaranteed their access to minerals from Sudan and port access on the Red Sea. The Red Sea is integral to global trade and Sudan rests in an important geographical location for facilitating global trade and supply chains. For the UAE, its political and economic interests in the Red Sea are paramount to its approach to Sudan. Last year, two UAE companies signed a \$6 billion preliminary agreement for the construction of the Abu Amama port on the Red Sea. However, the UAE also purchases and refines a majority of Sudan's gold, most of which comes from Hemedti. The Gulf country has also paid the RSF to send soldiers to Yemen to fight for their side. Thus, the UAE finds itself in a conflictive position having bolstered both sides of the conflict.

Russia, on the other hand, has a much more black-and-white position. Since its invasion of Crimea in 2014, Russia turned to African gold to bypass Western sanctions. On the eve of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Hemedti was in Moscow to discuss "advanced relations" between the RSF and Russia. Reportedly, RSF leadership granted Russia access to Sudan's gold riches in exchange for military and political support. The Wagner Group is sending soldiers to train RSF personnel in exchange for a stake in the gold trade. The Wagner Group is also using Libya to supply the RSF with missiles and other support via a Wagner-backed rogue Libyan general, Khalifa Haftar, who controls swaths of land in the east of the country. Satellite images two days before the war showed an uptick in movement by an Ilyushin-76 transport aircraft which was tracked flying from Haftar's Khadim airbase in Libya to Latakia, Syria where

Russia has an airbase, before returning to Libya the next day. Russia also has interests in securing a future military base in East Africa.

Haftar's role in Libya is significant because, as already shown by Russia, he can serve as an intermediary between foreign powers and the RSF, potentially prolonging the conflict and causing more devastation. Haftar and Hemedti are close allies and in recent years Hemedti has sent mercenaries to fight for Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). The two are also linked to highly profitable smuggling operations between Sudan and Libya. Haftar is suspected to be a supplier of fuel to Hemedti as the RSF is short on fuel due to al-Burhan's supporters controlling much of the oil and petrol infrastructure in Sudan. Moreover, the UAE is also an ally of Haftar. If the UAE decides to join the conflict on the side of the RSF, Haftar could facilitate Emirati involvement via Libya and spur a proxy conflict. However, Haftar must be careful to not isolate LNA supporters in Egypt who are backing the SAF in Sudan.



Refugees who fled Sudan headed to South Sudan, Photo Credit: Sam Mednick/AP

As a traditional supporter of Arab national armies rather than non-state actors, el-Sisi's government in Cairo aligns more naturally with the SAF and the government of Sudan. Although el-Sisi has ruled out Egyptian intervention in Sudan and pledged to not take sides, it is no secret that Egypt has long backed the Sudanese military. In particular, the two countries had bolstered

security relations in recent years, including joint military exercises, in response to Ethiopia's construction and filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Nile River which Egypt views as an existential threat. Cairo has a legitimate concern that should they decide to use a military option against Ethiopia, they would have to do so unilaterally. Yet, Egypt must walk a fine line between the two sides. Having received over \$100 billion in bailouts from the Gulf monarchies in the past decade, much of which from the UAE, it would be unwise for el-Sisi to take the opposite side of the UAE as their economy depends on them. So, for now Cairo's official position remains neutral.

Further, it is unclear the extent to which nearby Eritrea and Ethiopia will get involved. Shortly after Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declared war on Tigray in 2020, the Sudanese army took advantage of this distraction to attack the disputed border region of el-Fashag which is home to mostly the Amhara ethnic group. It is possible that now with Sudan at war, Amharan groups could turn the tables and launch an attack to reclaim the region which could drag Ethiopia into the conflict. Eritrea has long-standing relationships with several powerful tribes in eastern Sudan. If conflict spills over into this region, Eritrea will likely break its neutrality and deploy troops to protect its allies. This action could attract Tigrayan fighters who seek revenge against Eritrea that they accuse of massacring 300 Tigrayans before the peace deal was signed ending the war in Tigray. Hundreds of former Tigrayan United Nations Peacekeepers applied for asylum in Sudan in 2022 and Eritrean involvement could see them mobilize on behalf of the SAF which would have consequences on Ethiopia's neutrality. For now, the two countries are neutral as both are uncertain how the war will play out.

The United States and Saudi Arabia have positioned themselves as mediators in the conflict. On May 20, 2023, a seven-day ceasefire was broken in Jeddah, allowing humanitarian aid to reach the country. However, on May 31st, the SAF withdrew from the talks accusing the RSF of a lack of commitment to the terms of the ceasefire. Promptly, the US imposed sanctions on firms associated with the SAF and RSF, respectively. Meanwhile, the RSF has stated that it "unconditionally backs the Saudi-US initiative" and the "recent SAF violations have not deterred us from honoring our commitments." To date, peace talks have not resumed.

The geopolitical interests of various foreign powers, including the UAE, Russia, and Egypt, are bound to complicate the war in Sudan, increasing the risk of the conflict escalating into a proxy war. The involvement of the UAE, with its competing interests in both factions, highlights the

complex dynamics at play. Russia's engagement, driven by its pursuit of African gold and desire for a military base in East Africa, further exacerbates the conflict. The role of Haftar in Libya as a potential facilitator of foreign involvement and his alliance with the RSF adds another layer of complexity. Egypt, although traditionally aligned with Sudan's government, must tread carefully to avoid alienating its Gulf supporters while maintaining relations with the Sudanese military. The potential involvement of Eritrea and Ethiopia adds to the uncertainty, with the risk of the conflict spilling over into neighboring regions. So, for now, the primary actors in Sudan remain internal warlords and their armies. But with numerous countries having geopolitical and strategic stakes in Sudan, negotiators must balance each actor's complex political interests in order to avoid a proxy or regional war.

