



HEMEDTI CHALLENGES SAF'S CONTROL OVER SUDAN

SUDAN RAPID RESPONSE UPDATE 1 • MAY 2023

This paper focuses on the origins and the political and military objectives of the two main internal actors – the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) — in Sudan's ongoing conflict. It is the first in a series of briefing papers from Rift Valley Institute for the UK government's XCEPT (*Cross-Border Conflict, Evidence, Policy and Trends*) programme looking at the conflict. The second paper will examine the external actors to the conflict, including regional states and key international players.

KEY POINTS

- **The roots of the conflict between the SAF and RSF lie in the historical concentration of political power and wealth at Sudan's centre at the exclusion of the country's peripheries;** the reliance on militia groups to fight its counterinsurgency campaigns (particularly during the NCP regime); and the intense political competition unleashed by the removal of Omar al-Bashir in 2019.
- **For decades the SAF has inhabited a central role in Sudan's state, politics and economy. Sudanese politics is therefore deeply militarized** and SAF is a significantly politicized institution. Drawing its leadership predominantly from ethnic elites from central Sudan, SAF retains deep ties to key constituencies that dominated the Bashir era.
- **The rise of the RSF from local militia to a powerful national actor threatens SAF's preeminence.** The RSF's political, economic and military expansion represents a battle between the established military-political elite from the centre and a new militarized one from Darfur. It is a new phase in the struggle between centre and periphery in the country.
- **The conflict is part of the wider political disruption and struggle to control the direction of Sudan's transition to democracy and civilian rule.** SAF and RSF saw recent attempts to restore a civilian government, including the December 2022 Framework Agreement, as an opportunity to advance their interests at the expense of the other. Discussions on security sector reform crystalized these tensions, although what triggered the outbreak of violence remains unclear.
- **While indirect negotiations between the two sides have started in Saudi Arabia, it is not clear how they can be incentivized to stop the violence, especially as both feel the existence of the other is a threat.** If the conflict continues it becomes increasingly likely that external actors will become involved.

INTRODUCTION

On Saturday 15 April Sudanese woke up to the scenario that many had feared for years – open conflict between the SAF and RSF on the streets of the nation’s capital. With both parties heavily deployed around strategic locations and barracks in Khartoum and across the two Niles in Omdurman and Bahri (Khartoum North), fighting rocked densely populated urban areas. This included the use of heavy artillery, tanks, and airstrikes from attack helicopters and jet fighters. A series of ‘ceasefires’ allowed some of Khartoum’s residents to flee and the evacuation of foreign embassy, UN and NGO staff, but have not been fully respected. Beyond Khartoum, RSF positions in Blue Nile and eastern Sudan were quickly overrun but as the conflict spread to Darfur heavy fighting took place in the state capitals Nyala, El Fasher, and al-Geneina, resulting in significant violence against civilians and displacement, widespread destruction of infrastructure, and looting of markets, government offices, hospitals and the premises of humanitarian organizations. By early May the UN reported that more than 700,000 people had been displaced, with more than 1750,000 fleeing Sudan to neighbouring countries.¹

DIVERGING INTERESTS OF KEY SECURITY PLAYERS

Although it is still unclear what started the violence, the conflict between SAF and RSF is rooted in a combination of the historical concentration of power and wealth among a securitized elite from central Sudan; the legacy of Bashir’s use of militia groups – mostly recruited in Sudan’s border areas and peripheries – to fight its counterinsurgency wars in Darfur, the Two Areas, and eastern Sudan; and the instability and intense political competition unleashed by Bashir’s overthrow and the derailed 2018 revolution and transition to democracy. These factors created long and short-term tensions and competing interests between SAF as a key player and beneficiary of the established political order and the RSF as a rising military, political, and economic player from the peripheries.

The collapse of the NCP and the removal of Bashir brought to the fore shared interests between SAF and RSF, which were reinforced under the transition and resulted in their partnership in the 2021 October military coup. However, changing political dynamics after the coup, including the reemergence of actors associated with the NCP regime, destabilized this alliance and long-term rivalries resurfaced. The negotiations for the restoration of a transitional government under the Framework Agreement (signed in December 2022), and in particular the discussions on security sector reform, further increased tensions and crystalized long-term opposing goals. The violence erupted before the talks could be completed, plunging Sudan into another, potentially protracted, phase of violent conflict with likely devastating consequences for civilians and the prospects for durable peace and democracy.

1 The impact of the conflict on Sudan’s neighbours, and the Horn of Africa region more generally, will be explored in more detail in the second briefing paper in this series. For details on displacement see IOM Sudan, Displacement Tracking Matrix, 1 May 2023.

Sudan Armed Forces

SAF's long-term interests lie in the continuation of a system of power and a political economy that empowered and enriched them during the NCP regime. SAF's role at the centre of politics and the state is one of the defining features of Sudan's post-independence political order and remains at the heart of the current conflict. Since 1956 Sudan has had over 55 years of military rule and has witnessed more military coups than any other African country.² Sudanese politics is therefore deeply militarized and SAF is a significantly politicized institution, despite its formal structures and professional components. Traditionally, however, while much of its rank and file were recruited from communities in the peripheries, SAF's leadership is primarily drawn from ethnic groups from central Sudan, of which the Jaaliyin, Shagiya, and Danagla are the largest. Therefore, in contradiction to its own self-image as the defender of Sudanese unity and the custodian of the national interest, for decades SAF has been a key player and instrument in the political system that concentrated power and wealth in the hands of a small elite, built on the marginalization and violent extraction of resources from Sudan's peripheries. Much of SAF's leadership maintains deep social, political, and economic ties to these constituencies that dominated the Bashir era.

This preeminent political position was critical to the material and economic benefits SAF established for itself and continues to enjoy. SAF's domination of politics, coupled with the near permanent civil war against rebels from the peripheries, meant that historically SAF dominated the national budget, and from the 1980s became heavily involved in the wider economy. This included the creation of Sudan's weapons manufacturing and export business and an array of state-related enterprises under the Military Industry Corporation (now called the Defense Industries System) mixing both military and civilian sectors. Individually and as an institution SAF benefitted from the NCP's patronage system and the political economy. Political power and economic interests became mutually dependent.

Rapid Support Forces

Despite being a product of the NCP regime, and the many similarities and shared interests between them, the rise of Hemedti and the RSF represent a fundamental challenge to the political and economic status of SAF and to the political order that has sustained it for decades. The RSF was formed in 2013 largely out of Darfuri Arab militias, including *Janjaweed* groups,³ initially focused on Hemedti's Mahariya clan of the Rizeigat community, which mostly resides in Darfur, with strong kinship links to Rizeigat and similar communities residing in Chad.⁴

2 See: Peter Fabricius, 'Sudan, a coup laboratory', Institute for Security Studies, July 2020, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/sudan-a-coup-laboratory>

3 The Janjaweed were militias formed in the early 2000s that supported the NCP regime's counter-insurgency campaign. They emerged out of the conflicts, especially over land, that largely pitted Arab versus non-Arab communities in Chad and Darfur in 1970s to 1990s. While taking military direction from the NCP regime, the Janjaweed militias also sought to control land, displacing non-combatants targeted on an ethnic basis. Over time Janjaweed leaders and their supporters developed political aspirations and lobbied the NCP regime for more representation in Darfur and Khartoum. Hemedti developed out of this context and maintained these political aspirations when he ascended to the Sovereign Council in 2019.

4 The Mahariya living in Darfur now migrated from Chad to Sudan in the 1950s, and remain close to their kin in Chad.

Following the long-established pattern of Khartoum arming and mobilizing local communities to fight its counterinsurgency campaigns, the RSF was initially formed by the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) and used against the Darfur rebels and the communities associated with these. In 2017 it was brought under the direct control of the Presidency and used by Bashir as a counterbalance to the SAF and NISS in order to protect his own position. In line with the logic of Sudan's well-established war economy, the RSF also became a vehicle for Hemedti and his family to amass significant personal wealth and power through access to state funds and control of natural resources, including goldmines across Sudan in Northern and River Nile states, South Kordofan, and Darfur. The RSF's deployment to support the UAE and Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen in 2016 was vital in expanding the funds available to Hemedti and the RSF, their national and international profile, and the group's size and combat capabilities.

The RSF and Hemedti's national status and influence were consolidated in the April 2019 coup that removed Bashir. Hemedti then rose to prominence within first the Transitional Military Council and then as Burhan's deputy in the transitional government's Sovereign Council. Since 2019, the RSF has continued its transformation that has taken it from a collection of local militias with local objectives to a unified and powerful force with national political goals. The RSF is no longer a rag-tag militia but rather a well-trained and effective fighting force that can rival the SAF militarily, and is now a threat to the SAF's political and economic ambitions. Hemedti and the RSF's elevation militarily, economically and politically at a national level is unprecedented in modern Sudanese history. Seen from this perspective, the current conflict represents a battle between the established military-political elite from the centre and an emerging militarized elite from Darfur to control the state and is a new phase in the struggle between centre and periphery.

The political instability and disruption generated by the removal of Bashir and the 2018-19 revolution created the conditions for these long-term trends to move to the heart of national politics. Initially the RSF and SAF worked together to remove Bashir and form a government, and subsequently cooperated to remove that government in October 2021 to protect their shared interests. Shortly after this coup, however, the two sides fell out. Tensions built throughout 2022 and into 2023, before exploding in violence on 15 April. This conflict has now become the preeminent military and political competition in Sudan, and one that threatens to undo the limited progress the country has made since 2019.

WHAT TRIGGERED THE CONFLICT?

It is still unclear whether the violence that started on 15 April was the result of a decision by either of the parties' leaders to go to war, or if it was an unintended consequence of the build-up of tensions between the two forces since January 2023. In the months prior to the

See Small Arms Survey, HSBA, Working Paper 12, 'The Chad-Sudan Proxy War and the 'Darfurization' of Chad: Myths and Reality', 2008, 23.

outbreak of violence, differences between the parties had sharpened as discussions around the implementation of the Framework Agreement played out.

Despite its public commitments to hand over power to a civilian government and to not allow a return of the NCP and associated Islamist parties, SAF's political position and economic interests were clearly threatened by a genuine transition. SAF's calls for a more inclusive process, not dominated by a small group of parties (namely the FFC-Central Committee) and the formation of the FFC-Democratic Bloc with Egyptian support in January 2023, directly clashing with Phase Two of the Framework Agreement negotiations, suggests SAF were uncomfortable with the direction of the process and were looking to build an alternative civilian alliance that would defend their interests.⁵

In contrast, Hemedti had become increasingly critical of the October coup and supportive of the Framework Agreement, and was perceived as aligned, at least tactically and temporarily, with the FFC-CC. This was not an indicator of his commitment to democratic transformation, but more likely due to his calculation that a transitional process led by the FFC-CC could serve his political interests by curtailing the SAF's position and prevent a return of Islamist and security elite from the NCP regime (who are hostile to both the RSF and the FFC-CC).⁶

There had been indicators that tensions were growing, including aggressive recruitment by both parties in Darfur in 2022 and the RSF's deployment of a significant number of troops to Khartoum in the latter half of 2022 and into 2023. However, matters escalated with the launch of Phase Two discussions, particularly those on security sector reform, with both parties increasingly viewing the process as a zero-sum struggle for power and their own survival. The negotiations on these proved difficult to convene, with the SAF trying to exert its control over the process to the marginalization of the RSF, civilian forces and international actors. Whilst both parties repeated their public commitment to a single national army and the integration of the RSF into SAF, the two key issues of dispute became the timetable for this and the chain of command under the new transitional period. The RSF favoured a longer timetable – up to 10 years – for their integration, whilst SAF was pushing for this to be completed far sooner, possibly within 2 years. Similarly, whilst Hemedti wanted to report to a civilian Chief of the Armed Forces during the new transition, SAF wanted him directly under Burhan's authority.

These tensions were never resolved as fighting started before the negotiations could be concluded. However, these points of disagreement reflect the high level of mistrust and rivalry between the parties and how they were both instrumentalizing the Framework Agreement negotiations to serve their longer-term interests. For SAF, the SSR talks presented an opportunity to undermine the autonomy of the RSF, and to control the SSR process, thereby

5 The FFC-CC is the rump of the original FFC with the National Umma Party (NUP), Sudanese Congress Party (SCoP), the Unionist Gathering, a Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) splinter led by al-Hassan Mirghani, and Yasir Arman's SPLM-N faction playing leading roles. The FFC-DB consists of most of the Juba Peace Agreement signatories, Mubarak Ardol's party, the Umma party of Mubarak al-Fadil, a DUP splinter led by Jaafar Mirghani, and other smaller parties.

6 The NCP-era Islamists and the RSF had grown increasingly hostile as the latter came out strongly against their return while the SAF was never able to make a clean break from their influence.

protecting their political and economic interests. For the RSF, the SSR discussions offered an opportunity to empower civilian involvement and the reform of SAF whilst maintaining their own operational independence beyond the foreseen 2 to 3 years of a new transitional period and crucially the election of a new government. However, the creation of a single national army and a genuine SSR process presented a threat to both their political power and economic interests. It is highly unlikely that either were committed to an SSR process that would substantially reduce their size or put them under effective civilian control and oversight.

Seen from this perspective, the new conflict also reflects SAF's determination to defend its political preeminence and resist a fully civilian government, and the wider struggle of the transition from the authoritarian NCP regime to a new democratic, civilian and plural political system. Since the outbreak of the violence, the RSF have portrayed Burhan as a radical Islamist and the conflict as the 'price of democracy', while SAF have designated the RSF as a 'rebel' militia. Furthermore, members of the FFC-CC have described the conflict as a battle to prevent the return of Islamist groups, while members of the FFC-Democratic Bloc have claimed that the FFC-CC are supporting the RSF's 'coup', and Sudan Liberation Movement leader Minni Minnawi has blamed the 'exclusionary' Framework Agreement for the outbreak of the conflict. However, other civilian actors, including some Resistance Committees, have strongly criticized both parties, claiming neither are interested in democracy or the wider interests of the Sudanese population.

STATE OF THE CONFLICT AND POTENTIAL FOR NEGOTIATIONS

Since the conflict broke out, the RSF has either taken control over, or is heavily contesting, most of the key installations in the Khartoum area. They have done better than expected, forcing the SAF to bunker down in its remaining barracks, especially in the general command headquarters by the airport and a key area in southeastern Omdurman. Fighting in Khartoum continues as both sides try to establish control over bridges and key logistical routes. Both parties are seeking to control the symbols and institutions of state power, and therefore assert their command over the central government. In Darfur, the SAF has done better than might be expected, maintaining control over its barracks in Nyala, Zalingei, and al-Fashir, while al-Geneina remains heavily contested. In Kordofan, control over al-Obeid is being fought over with the RSF attempting to dislodge the SAF.

Both sides have shown every indication that they will continue to fight in Khartoum, Kordofan, and Darfur. In addition to securing logistical supplies and routes in and out of Khartoum, both sides have sought to mobilize fighters in areas outside of the capital. In Darfur, especially, this has taken on ethnic overtones, with the SAF looking to mobilize those hostile to Hemedti and the RSF, including signatories to the Juba Peace Agreement who still command their own armed groups, and Musa Hilal, who rose to notoriety through his command of irregular pro-government *Janjaweed* forces during the main phase of the Darfur conflict, but entered

into a bitter feud with Hemedti in 2017 that continues to this day. This could create conflict dynamics based on ethnicity that would spread the war beyond the specific SAF versus RSF dynamics and give it its own locally specific dynamics and inertia. This type of violence would occur in the peripheries, especially Sudan's western border region, and could draw in non-Sudanese actors from the Central African Republic, Chad and Libya.

By 8 May both sides had sent a negotiation team to Saudi Arabia, and indirect negotiations have started. Direct negotiations between the two sides are possible, but it is not clear how either side could be incentivized to stop, especially as both feel the existence of the other is a threat. Furthermore, any future settlement will have to decide once and for all the status of Sudan's armed forces, necessitating a return to the SSR negotiations that were occurring when the fighting broke out. Since both sides view the SSR negotiations in stark, zero-sum terms, their discussions will likely be an extension of the battlefield violence. These negotiations would then happen in an atmosphere of increased mistrust between the two sides and with a Sudanese population ever more convinced that the SSR process and the armed forces have to be under civilian control. While this process is being sorted out, fighting is likely to continue, with civilians across the country paying a heavy burden.

CREDITS

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