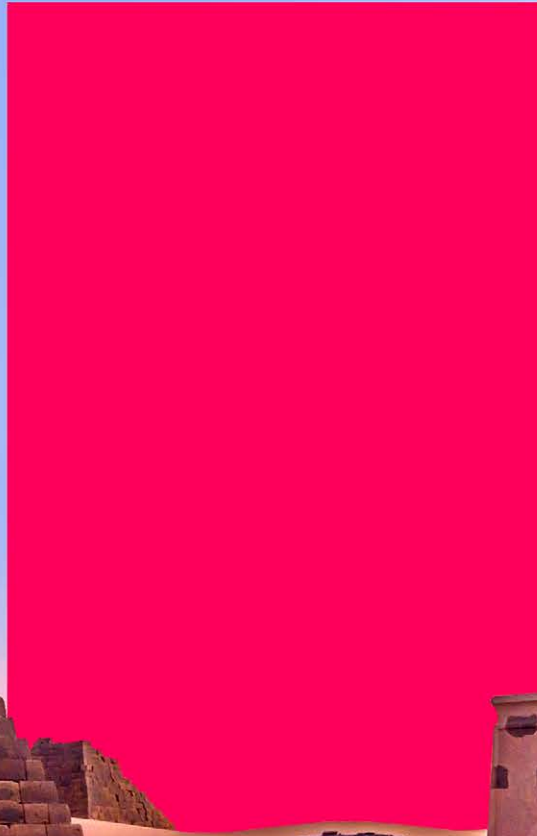


SPOTLIGHT ON SUDAN



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External Power Competition in Sudan Since the April 2023 War

Introduction

On April 15, 2023, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary carried out nationwide attacks against Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) military infrastructure. RSF forces swiftly captured the headquarters of Sudan's state broadcaster Sudan TV and clashed with SAF forces near the Sudanese Presidential Palace. The SAF retaliated by sealing off transport routes to Khartoum and carrying out surgical airstrikes against RSF positions. These violent clashes plunged Sudan into a state of civil war. RSF chief Mohammed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo claimed that he was fighting against "radical Islamists who hope to keep Sudan isolated and in the dark."² SAF Commander-in-chief General Abdel Fattah el-Burhan responded by accusing Hemedti of "an attempted coup and rebellion against the state."³ Despite numerous attempts to broker a ceasefire between the warring military strongmen, the civil war in Sudan has continued unabated. Between 4,000 to 10,000 Sudanese have lost their lives, 4.1 million are internally displaced and 1.1 million are refugees.

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² Twitter, April 17, 2023 <https://twitter.com/GeneralDagallo/status/1647887773011959809>

³ Nima Elbagir, Jessie Yeung and Rob Picheta, *Sudan Military Leader Accuses Rival of "Attempted Coup" as Vicious Fighting Grips Capital*, *CNN*, April 17, 2023 <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/17/africa/sudan-fighting-evacuation-suspension-intl-hnk/index.html>

The international community responded to Sudan's civil war in a variety of ways. The United States, European Union, and African Union back a ceasefire and swift democratic transition. China, Turkey, Israel, Qatar, and Iran have played spectator roles. They either wish to maintain positive relations with whoever has an upper hand in the Sudan conflict or view both Burhan and Hemedti with a degree of scepticism. Egypt and Saudi Arabia support Burhan to varying degrees, while the UAE and Russia have covertly backed the RSF. Yet even these partisan stakeholders have pursued intricate balancing strategies. Burhan and Hemedti capitalized on the flexibility of most external stakeholders to bolster their international profile, while continuing to pursue costly zero-sum military campaigns.

The Mediators: The United States, European Union, and African Union

Since the war's outset, the U.S. has consistently supported a ceasefire and expeditious return to Sudan's December 2022 civilian transition Framework Agreement (FA). This FA mandated the Sudanese military's detachment from political life and non-defence related businesses, and elections after a two-year transition. The U.S. tried to reinstate the FA through rigorous intra-party diplomacy. On April 24, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced a 72-hour ceasefire between the SAF and RSF.⁴ In the following months, the U.S. unsuccessfully coordinated with Saudi Arabia on ceasefire initiatives. As peace prospects faded and violence in Darfur worsened, the U.S. sanctioned Hemedti's brother Abdelrahim Hamdan Dagalo and RSF West Darfur commander Abdul Rahman on September 6. The U.S. strengthened its anti-RSF sanctions on September 28 by blacklisting Sudan-based information company GSK Advance and Russia-based military company Aviatrade for providing UAVs and surveillance equipment to Hemedti's forces.⁵ These sanctions do not indicate a pro-SAF stance, as the U.S. blames both the SAF and RSF for the war and sanctioned Bashir-era Foreign Minister Ali Kurti for backing Islamist movements that resist a ceasefire.

The EU's position mirrors the U.S.'s calls for a ceasefire and restoration of civilian rule in Sudan. Aside from its May 27 endorsement of the U.S. and African Union's ceasefire initiatives and participations in Troika (U.S., Britain, and Norway) plus EU consultations, the EU has not formed an independent mediation format. The EU has been more assertive in promoting humanitarian aid and punishing war crimes in Sudan. The EU has allocated 73 million euros in humanitarian aid and created a humanitarian air bridge to transfer supplies transit from UN warehouses in Dubai to Sudan. The EU has also vocally championed unimpeded humanitarian aid deliveries and aided fleeing Sudanese refugees by sending EU humanitarian experts from Sudan's neighbours to border crossing points.⁶ In late July, the EU also established a

⁴ *Sudan Factions Agree to 72-hour Ceasefire as Foreigners Evacuated*, Al Jazeera, April 24, 2023
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/24/us-says-sudan-factions-agree-to-ceasefire-as-foreigners-evacuated>

⁵ *Jack Jeffery, U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Former Sudanese Minister and 2 Companies Backing Paramilitary Force*, Associated Press, September 28, 2023
<https://apnews.com/article/sudan-war-conflict-sanctions-3712c01b80709b60703abc87db4392fa>

⁶ *Humanitarian Crisis in Sudan: 5 Ways the EU is Helping*, The European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Operations, May 15, 2023
https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/news-stories/stories/humanitarian-crisis-sudan-5-ways-eu-helping_en

new Sudan sanctions framework, which would target local actors that impede a transition to democracy and threaten Sudan's stability.⁷

Although the AU has steadfastly supported a ceasefire and civilian transition in Sudan, its inconsistent level of diplomatic engagement has attracted criticism in the region. AU Chairman and Comoros President Azali Assouamni spoke with Burhan on April 23 and Hemedti on April 25, but ultimately ceded diplomatic leadership to the U.S. and Saudi Arabia.⁸ The AU Roadmap for a ceasefire and political settlement in Sudan, which was unveiled on May 27, and mediation efforts from the East African regional IGAD Quartet group have proven similarly ineffective. The SAF's fears of undue political interference from regional institutions and powers have consistently restricted the scope for diplomacy. At the July 10 IGAD Quartet meeting, SAF assistant commander-in-chief Lieutenant General Yasser al-Atta called IGAD's peacekeeping proposal an invasion plan and goaded the Kenyan army to confront Sudan directly.⁹ The SAF has discredited Kenya's mediation ambitions as it believes that President William Ruto covertly backs the RSF. The SAF also undermined Ethiopia's arbitration efforts by accusing it of plotting escalations in the disputed al-Fashaga region.¹⁰ These frictions ensure that an African-led solution to Sudan's civil war is unlikely to swiftly transpire.

The Spectators: China, Turkey, Israel, Qatar, and Iran

Despite China's aggressive promotion of its Global Security Initiative over the past year, it has not assumed a mediation role in Sudan. China's restraint can be explained by its cautious support for Sudan's post-Bashir transition to civilian rule, which restricted its engagement with its military leadership, and unwillingness to assume a position that would alienate any of the SAF or RSF's external backers. It also reflects Sudan's declining importance in China's hierarchy of economic partnerships in Africa. From 2011-18, China invested only \$143 million in Sudan, which was a massive drop from the \$6 billion it invested from 2003-10.¹¹ South Sudan was the major beneficiary of China's investment drawdown from Sudan and the lack of a southward spill-over of the SAF-RSF conflict reduced the imperative for Chinese mediation. Moreover, the return of Chinese investment to Sudan will likely be linked to Saudi Arabia's mega-projects, and China would not wish to upstage Riyadh's mediation efforts.¹² Therefore, China has showcased its apo-

⁷ Julia Payne, *EU to Toughen its Stance on Sudan War with Sanctions Framework- Sources*, Reuters, July 25, 2023 <https://www.reuters.com/world/eu-toughen-its-stance-sudan-war-with-sanctions-framework-sources-2023-07-25/>

⁸ Taji MHaka, *Why is the African Union Absent in Sudan*, Al Jazeera, May 24, 2023 <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/5/24/why-is-the-african-union-absent-in-sudan>

⁹ *Tension between Sudan, Kenya's Ruto Impedes IGAD Mediation Effort in Sudan*, Voice of America, July 25, 2023 <https://www.voanews.com/a/tension-between-sudan-kenya-s-ruto-impedes-igad-mediation-effort-in-sudan/7195894.html>

¹⁰ *Will Ethiopia Take Advantage of Sudan's Unrest to Resolve Border Dispute*, Asharq al-Awsat, April 22, 2023 <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/4287951/will-ethiopia-take-advantage-sudan%E2%80%99s-unrest-resolve-border-dispute>

¹¹ Matai Muon and Brian Wong, *Can China Broker Peace in Sudan?*, The Diplomat, May 9, 2023 <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/can-china-broker-peace-in-sudan/>

¹² Edward Yeranian, *China Seeks Stronger Ties with Sudan Amid Regional, International Tug-of-War*, Voice of America, May 30, 2023 <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-seeks-stronger-ties-with-sudan-amid-regional-international-tug-of-war-7115426.html>

litical achievements, such as the swift deployment of warships from the Gulf of Aden to Sudan for large-scale evacuations and remained silent about its preferred power balance in Sudan.

Unlike its hard alignments in Syria and Libya's civil wars, Turkey has not picked a side in Sudan's intra-military conflict. Turkey's non-aligned position stems from its mistrust of both Burhan and Hemedti. Turkey saw Burhan's takeover in 2019 as the product of machinations by its rivals Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. Turkey also mistrusted Hemedti, as he aligned with Libya National Army (LNA) chieftain Khalifa Haftar in his ill-fated Tripoli offensive and shunned Turkey after it provided humanitarian aid to RSF strongholds in South Darfur.¹³ Hemedti's May 2021 and Burhan's August 2021 visits to Ankara, which resulted in new commercial deals and Sudan's leasing of 100,000 hectares of cropland to Turkey, eased tensions. Nevertheless, old grievances persisted amongst Turkish nationalists. *Yeni Akit* columnist Ahmet Varol described the RSF as "bandit gangs" and blasted Burhan's disinterest in protecting the lives and properties of Sudanese citizens.¹⁴

Despite its negative impression of both parties, Turkey has unsuccessfully tried to mediate in Sudan. On April 20, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke with Burhan and Hemedti, and offered to host direct SAF-RSF negotiations in Ankara. Both parties rejected Erdogan's offer, but Turkey's mediation efforts persisted. On April 29, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu vowed to coordinate with Ethiopia on conflict resolution.¹⁵ While Turkey was consigned to the fringes of conflict resolution efforts in Sudan, its diplomatic ambitions received an unexpected boost on June 30. Over a phone call, Burhan told Erdogan that the SAF would accept "any Turkish initiative to stop the war and bring peace to Sudan."¹⁶ Erdogan responded by vowing to step up humanitarian aid to Sudan, such as its support for the Turkish Hospital in Nyala in South Darfur. Erdogan hosted Burhan in Ankara on September 13 but this meeting did not advance Turkey's arbitration goals.

As hostilities erupted, Israeli officials expressed concern about that their normalization efforts with Sudan would unravel. Even though Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen discussed a peace agreement with Burhan in Khartoum, the SAF's co-option of hard-line Islamists caused alarm in Israel. Even though Hemedti declared in October 2020 that "there is no enmity between us and Israel, and no war," his instrumental partnership with National Umma Party leader Mariam al-Mahdi was viewed with concern.¹⁷ Moreover, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government was split over which faction would be more likely to support a peace agreement. The Director General of Israel's Foreign Ministry Ronen Levy backed the SAF, while

¹³ Fehim Tastekin, *Turkey's Erdogan Treads Cautiously on Sudan, Wary of Betting on Wrong Horse*, *Al Monitor*, April 29, 2023
<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/turkeys-erdogan-treads-cautiously-sudan-wary-betting-wrong-horse>

¹⁴ Ahmet Varol, *Sudan'a yazık oldu (It's a Shame for Sudan)*, *Yeni Akit*, April 28, 2023
<https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/yazarlar/ahmet-varol/sudana-yazik-oluyor-41935.html>

¹⁵ Turkey, *Ethiopia Try to Act as Mediators in Sudan Conflict*, *Daily Sabah*, April 28, 2023
https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-ethiopia-try-to-act-as-mediators-in-sudan-conflict?gallery_image=undefined#big

¹⁶ El Burhan "Accepts Any Turkish Proposal to Bring Peace to Sudan," *RSF Releases Prisoners*, *Radio Dabanga*, June 30, 2023
<https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/el-burhan-accepts-any-turkish-initiative-to-bring-peace-to-sudan-rsf-releases-prisoners>

¹⁷ Ehud Yaari, *The Fighting in Sudan Threatens Peace Efforts with Israel*, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 21, 2023
<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fighting-sudan-threatens-peace-efforts-israel>

the Mossad security agency sided with the RSF, as it maintained backchannel links with Hemedti and invited him on a secret trip to Israel.¹⁸ In tandem with the U.S. and the UAE, Israel unsuccessfully attempted to broker talks between the SAF and RSF in late April, and subsequently refrained from further diplomacy.¹⁹

Qatar's neutrality in Sudan's civil war stems from its marginalization since Burhan's October 2021 coup against Hamdok. Qatar's sole potential area of strength is Darfur. In the months leading up to the war, Qatar tried to facilitate the return of Libya-based Darfur fighters to Sudan and discussed possible investments in the embattled region with Darfur leader Minni Arko Minawi.²⁰ These efforts have not extended to wartime mediation, as Qatar has not attempted to deter RSF attacks on civilians or mitigate the risk posed by the proliferation of anti-RSF militias in Darfur. Despite Iran's resumption of diplomatic relations with Sudan, which was largely a function of the March 2023 Saudi Arabia-Iran normalization agreement, Tehran views both parties with suspicion. The *Tehran Times* claimed, "The two parties- Burhan and Hemedti- are conspirators against the Islamic nation and their history is black in bloodshed, looting of wealth and collaboration with the Zionists."²¹ The popularity of these sentiments, as well as the belief that the war serves Western interests, prevented Iran from taking sides.

The Burhan-Leaning Stakeholders: Egypt and Saudi Arabia

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi views the outbreak of war in Sudan as a major national security threat. As Libya's election impasse endures and Israel invades the Gaza Strip, Egypt wants to avoid protracted instability on its southern²² border. If war persists, Egypt fears an Ethiopian escalation over the Grand Renaissance Dam dispute (GERD) and a spill-over of instability to the Red Sea region, which would disrupt navigation through the Suez Canal.²³ Egypt is equally wary of the economic disruptions and terrorism risks associated with uncontrolled migration. After 256,000 Sudanese refugees streamed across the northern border, Egypt decreed in July 2023 that all future entrants would need to obtain visas from Wadi Halfa or Port Sudan. Despite outcry from human rights activists and claims that the visa mandate violated the August 2004 Egypt-Sudan Four Freedoms Agreement, Egypt has not softened its policy.²⁴ Supply chain disruptions are an important secondary concern for Egypt. Sudan provides Egypt with 10% of its live meat and livestock, and export disruptions could exacerbate food price inflation.

¹⁸ Ben Caspit, *Israel's Security Chiefs Split on Supporting Sudan's Burhan, Hemedti*, *Al-Monitor*, April 21, 2023 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/israels-security-chiefs-split-supporting-sudans-burhan-hemedti>

¹⁹ Barak Ravid, *Scoop: Israel Offers to Host Warring Sudanese Generals for Talks*, *Axios*, April 24, 2023 <https://www.axios.com/2023/04/24/sudan-israel-invite-burhan-hemedti-talks>

²⁰ Asmahan Qarjouli, *Qatar to Host Meeting Between Sudan's Conflicting Parties: Reports*, *Doha News*, February 2, 2023 <https://dohanews.co/qatar-to-host-meeting-between-sudans-conflicting-parties-reports/>

²¹ Sondoos al-Assad, *Where is Sudan Heading For?*, *Tehran Times*, April 30, 2023 <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/484134/Where-is-Sudan-heading-for>

²²

²³ Amr Khan, *Madha law tawaqaf alqital almusalah faa alsuwdan?.. alsynariuhat almuhtamala (What if Armed Fighting Stopped in Sudan? Possible Scenarios)*, *Siyassa*, August 3, 2023 <https://www.siyassa.org.eg/News/19648.aspx>

²⁴ *Activists Want Egypt to Ease Entry for Refugees from Sudan Conflict*, *Voice of America*, July 24, 2023 <https://www.voanews.com/a/activists-want-egypt-to-ease-entry-for-refugees-from-sudan-conflict/7193823.html>

Although Egypt cultivated ties with both Burhan and Hemedti after the 2019 coup, the April 2023 war converted Sisi into Burhan's most strident international backer. Egypt's long-standing military-to-military cooperation with Sudan and mistrust of Hemedti's courtship of Ethiopia explain Sisi's pro-Burhan stance. The RSF's three-day capture of 177 Egyptian troops and MiG-29 jets, which were participating in military exercises in Sudan when the war erupted, further inflamed tension with Cairo. To strengthen Burhan's position, Egypt has leveraged regional diplomacy and covertly armed the SAF. Egypt convened a summit with Sudan's neighbours on July 13, where it pushed back against IGAD's peace plan for being insufficiently pro-Burhan.²⁵ During Burhan's August 29 visit to Cairo, Egypt and Sudan discussed military cooperation. Lieutenant General Mirghani Idris Suleiman, the Director General of the Defence Industries System and overseer of Sudan's weapons manufacturing, accompanied Burhan on his trip. Aside from providing military intelligence to the SAF, Egyptian fighter jets have reportedly struck RSF targets.²⁶ Egypt also defied U.S. pressure by covertly supplying Turkish Bayraktar TB-2 drones to the SAF.²⁷ Egypt's military aid to the SA is unlikely to escalate into a full-scale military intervention, as such drastic action would undermine Saudi Arabia's mediation efforts and risk a proxy war with the UAE.

Saudi Arabia has instead of was viewed the war's outbreak as a setback, as it was a critical investor in Sudan's economy. In October 2022, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) established a subsidiary in Sudan. On November 8, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman offered Burhan \$3 billion in new investments. Saudi Arabia believed that its investment pledges make it a credible voice of de-escalation. Until mid-April, Saudi officials engaged regularly with Burhan and Hemedti to prevent a war.²⁸ After hostilities erupted, Saudi media outlets warned of a protracted conflict and backed Burhan. *Okaz* claimed a "hidden third party" stoked the conflict and predicted that Sudan could become a Libya-style failed state.²⁹ Saudi commentator Tariq al-Homayed argued that "only the victory of the army, which is the lesser evil, can help Sudan." Al-Homayed argued that a RSF victory would lead to a catastrophic "end of the Sudanese state and replacement by militias."³⁰

Al-Homayed's contentions reflected Saudi Arabia's view that Burhan's centralized leadership would further its Red Sea security agenda and protect its investments.³¹ Nevertheless, *Okaz* contended that the SAF was unlikely to triumph outright, as the RSF's agile combat units were adept at urban warfare and possessed independent financial resources.³² While Saudi Arabia

²⁵ Alex de Waal, *Sudan Crisis: From Ruto to Sisi, Leaders Vie to Drive Peace Process*, BBC News, July 13, 2023 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-66169535>

²⁶ Shahira Amin, *Is Egypt Planning a Full-Scale Invasion of Sudan*, Atlantic Council, June 1, 2023 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/egypt-sudan-military-invasion/>

²⁷ Ignoring U.S. Calls for Peace, Egypt Delivered Drones to Sudan's Military, *Wall Street Journal*, October 14, 2023 <https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/ignoring-u-s-calls-for-peace-egypt-delivered-drones-to-sudans-military-6f7fdcd4>

²⁸ Riyadh Takes on Task of Mediating Between Hemedti and Burhan, *Africa Intelligence*, April 14, 2023 <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2023/04/14/riyadh-takes-on-task-of-mediating-between-hemedti-and-burhan,109945793-art>

²⁹ *alsuwdan eabqariat aliastiemar warnutalazimat aleaskar (Sudan: The Genius of Colonialism and Military Syndrome)*, *Okaz* April 24, 2023 <https://www.okaz.com.sa/articles/authors/2131826>

³⁰ Tariq Al-Homayed, *And Now Sudan*, *Asharq al-Awsat*, April 19, 2023 <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/4282731/tariq-al-homayed/...and-now-sudan>

³¹ Al-Anani, May 11, 2023

³² *Isudan yadkhuil nfqaan mzlmaan (Sudan is Entering a Dark Tunnel)*, *Okaz*, April 19, 2023 <https://www.okaz.com.sa/articles/authors/2131478>

sees the UAE as an economic competitor in Sudan, it is also wary of Egypt's ambitions and prefers a weaker Burhan to Egyptian military intervention.³³ Due to these calculations, Saudi Arabia has disguised its soft alignment with Burhan and framed itself as a neutral stakeholder. To court the RSF, Saudi media outlets feature perspectives that frame Hemedti as pro-peace and depict Burhan as a proxy of Bashir loyalists who wish to prolong the war.³⁴ Sudanese commentators like Youseif Basher, believe this gambit has worked, as both the SAF and RSF view Saudi Arabia as neutral.³⁵

Capitalizing on its impartial image, Saudi Arabia viewed humanitarian assistance and mediation as the most effective means of maintaining its influence in Sudan. The U.S. greeted these efforts positively, as Blinken praised Saudi Arabia's actions in Sudan during his June 6 meeting with Mohammed bin Salman.³⁶ From April 15 to May 12, Saudi Arabia evacuated 404 of its own citizens and 8,051 foreign nationals and served as a transition stop for a further 11,184 foreign nationals.³⁷ After the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSRelief) pledged \$100 million in aid to Sudan in May, Saudi Arabia framed itself as a humanitarian aid partner for Western countries. On June 19, Saudi Arabia spearheaded a major donor conference which transpired in Geneva. On August 9, KSRelief and Britain's FCDO signed a joint \$9.16 million agreement to aid Sudan.³⁸

Saudi Arabia also emerged as the primary Arab mediator in Sudan. On April 28, Saudi Ambassador to Britain Khalid bin Bandar claimed that Riyadh wanted a "permanent cessation of hostilities" and would prioritize "security and stability" before creating a civilian government.³⁹ Bandar backed inclusive negotiations but did not explicitly endorse a Burhan-Hemedti power sharing agreement. Despite Bandar's ambitions, *Okaz* ruled out a peace treaty and predicted that only "limited truces" to aid civilians would transpire.⁴⁰ This pessimistic assessment came to fruition. On May 8, SAF and RSF representatives congregated in Jeddah for peace talks. Despite Saudi Arabia's active coordination with the U.S. on a grand bargain, SAF delegates refused to meet directly with their RSF counterparts and the RSF restricted the scope of discussions to aid provisions to Sudanese civilians.⁴¹ On May 31, the SAF withdrew from the Jeddah talks

³³ Stephan Roll, *Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE: The End of an Alliance*, SWP Berlin, 2023
<https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C47v02/>

³⁴ Arman to Asharq al-Awsat: Burhan Represents the Army, Not Sudan, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 26-27, 2023
<https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4570531-arman-asharq-al-awsat-burhan-represents-army-not-sudan>

³⁵ Giorgio Cafiero, *Analysis: Saudi Arabia's Diplomatic Energy, Soft Power in Sudan*, *Al Jazeera*, May 15, 2023
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/15/analysis-saudi-arabias-diplomatic-energy-soft-power-in-sudan>

³⁶ Secretary Blinken's Meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, U.S. Department of State, June 6, 2023
<https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-meeting-with-saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman/>

³⁷ Saudi Arabia Concludes Evacuation Operation in Sudan, *Arab News*, May 12, 2023
<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2301891/saudi-arabia>

³⁸ KSRelief and Britain Join Forces in \$9.16m Donation to Aid Sudan, *Arab News*, August 9, 2023
<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2352336/saudi-arabia>

³⁹ Patrick Wintour, *Saudi Arabia "Working for Sudan Ceasefire and Restoring Civilian Rule," The Guardian*, April 28, 2023
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/28/saudi-arabia-working-for-sudan-ceasefire-and-restoring-civilian-rule>

⁴⁰ *huud alqudrat alduwliat liwaqf alharb fi alsuwdan (The Limits of International Capacity to Stop the War in Sudan)*, *Okaz*, April 26, 2023
<https://www.okaz.com.sa/articles/authors/2131894>

⁴¹ Jason Burke, *Sudan's Warring Sides Arrive in Saudi Arabia for Talks as Fighting Rages On*, *The Guardian*, May 6, 2023
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/06/sudans-warring-sides-to-begin-talks-in-saudi-arabia-as-fighting-rages-on>

over the RSF's continued occupation of residential areas, hospitals, and police stations. While Saudi Arabia has since re-engaged the warring parties, it has only achieved poorly enforced ceasefires. Burhan's increasingly hard-line stance on the RSF, which included a pledge never to sign a deal with them during his Cairo trip, sits uneasily in Riyadh.

The Hemedti-Leaning Stakeholders: The UAE and Russia

The UAE is widely believed to be Hemedti's primary international backer. This assertion contradicts the UAE's official policy, as it supported the December 2022 civilian transition agreement and President Mohammed bin Zayed welcomed Burhan to Abu Dhabi on February 14. In a show of confidence in Sudan's stability, Abu Dhabi Ports Group announced a \$6 billion investment in the Abu Amama port on December 18. This investment package included plans to build an industrial zone, international airport and agricultural zone covering 400,000 acres.⁴² Nevertheless, UAE officials privately feared that a democratic transition could jeopardize its economic interests. In March 2022, rumours that Hemedti could sign a privatization agreement with the UAE for Port Sudan triggered large protests.⁴³ To prevent a repeat outcome, the UAE launched an information campaign in Sudan, which promoted Twitter hashtags, such as "Sudan in the heart of the Emirates" and "No to Freedom and Change," and advertised Abu Amama.⁴⁴ This campaign was exposed by a Khartoum-based Beam Reports probe, and when war erupted, the UAE sought to secure its interests by gambling on a swift RSF victory.

The UAE's confidence in Hemedti reflected a years-long security and economic partnership. RSF forces aided the UAE's military intervention against Houthi militias in southern Yemen and aligned with the UAE in supporting the LNA's offensive against Tripoli. Algunade, a gold company that Bashir bequeathed to Hemedti's family, shipped \$30 million in gold to Dubai in one four-week period in 2018.⁴⁵ As the UAE imported \$1.315 billion in Sudanese gold during the first half of 2022, which was all of Sudan's legal gold exports, it has likely retained links to Hemedti-linked entities.⁴⁶ Since war erupted, the UAE aided Hemedti's information campaigns and provided arms to the RSF. One of the three administrators of Hemedti's Facebook account is UAE-based and his hostile rhetoric towards Islamist movements closely mirrors long-standing Emirati narratives. In early June, a UAE plane transferred arms to the RSF under

⁴² *Sudan Signs \$6 Billion UAE Deal for new Red Sea Port*, Africa News, December 14, 2022
<https://www.africanews.com/2022/12/14/sudan-signs-6-billion-uae-deal-for-new-red-sea-port/>

⁴³ *Hemedti Visit Prompts Protests in Port Sudan*, Radio Dabanga, March 16, 2022
<https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/hemeti-visit-prompts-protests-in-port-sudan>

⁴⁴ *Tahqiq li (bim riburtis) yakshif ean shabakat fi (tuytar) turwj limasalih abiimarat bialsuwdan watuhajim quaaan siasiatan (An Investigation by Beam Reports Reveals a Network on Twitter that Promotes the UAE's Interests in Sudan and Attacks Political Forces)*, Beam Reports, February 26, 2023
<https://www.beamreports.com/2023/02/26/تحقيق-ل-بم-ريپورتس-يكشف-عن-شبكة-في-تو>

⁴⁵ *Exclusive: Sudan Militia Leader Grew Rich by Selling Gold*, Reuters, November 26, 2019
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-gold-exclusive-idUSKBN1Y01DQ>

⁴⁶ *UAE Purchased all of Sudan's Gold Exports in H1 2022*, Middle East Economy, October 11, 2022
<https://economymiddleeast.com/news/uae-purchased-all-of-sudans-gold-exports-in-h1-2022/>

the guise of providing aid to Sudanese refugees. These arms shipments transited through Uganda and Chad to the RSF.⁴⁷ The UAE has also used a field hospital in north-eastern Chad to funnel arms to the RSF in western Sudan and provide medical treatment for its forces.⁴⁸

The UAE's support for the RSF has further eroded its soft power in Sudan. A leaked recording attributed to Sudanese Army Chief of Staff General Kamel Abdel Marouf, which claimed that Mohammed bin Zayed personally helped Hemedti plan the start of military operations, was especially damaging.⁴⁹ The UAE has attempted to improve its image in Sudan with humanitarian aid donations, such as its dispatch of 30 tons of medical aid with the World Health Organization (WHO) on May 5 and the delivery of 13 tons of food to Sudanese civilians via Chad on August 11. The UAE also facilitated the release of Egyptian hostages captured by the RSF at the war's inception.⁵⁰ UAE Vice President Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed's April 30 outreach to Burhan illustrates its enduring desire for diplomatic relevance. While the UAE's leverage over Hemedti could be of use in future negotiations, it has been forced to cede leadership on conflict resolution to Saudi Arabia.

Russia's initial statements emphasized the war's humanitarian costs and the need for an African-led resolution to the conflict. Russian officials and media outlets also scathingly criticized Western policy as the conflict's ultimate instigator. On April 25, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused the U.S. of "geopolitical engineering," as it pressured Bashir into letting South Sudan secede and sanctioned both Sudan and South Sudan, instead of encouraging their peaceful development.⁵¹ Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Anna Evstigneeva blamed the conflict on the December 2022 democratic transition framework, which she called insufficiently inclusive.⁵² Russian Telegram channels promoted synergistic narratives. The "Militarist" Telegram channel blamed U.S. Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland's democracy promotion efforts for the Burhan-Hemedti conflict.⁵³ Former Kremlin advisor Sergey Markov lionized Bashir as a Leonid Brezhnev-style stabilizing figure and compared the SAF-RSF conflict to the rivalry between Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin that destroyed the Soviet Union.⁵⁴

While Russia stridently opposes a democratic transition in Sudan, it has not publicly endorsed either Burhan or Hemedti as its autocrat of choice. Nevertheless, Russia's interests

⁴⁷ Nicolas Bariyo and Benoit Facon, *A U.S. Ally Promised to Send Aid to Sudan. It Sent Weapons Instead*, *Wall Street Journal*, August 10, 2023
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-u-s-ally-promised-to-send-aid-to-sudan-it-sent-weapons-instead-82d396f>

⁴⁸ *Talking Peace in Sudan, the UAE Secretly Fuels the Fight*, *New York Times*, September 29, 2023
<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/29/world/africa/sudan-war-united-arab-emirates-chad.html>

⁴⁹ *UAE Behind RSF's Attempted Coup in Sudan, Leaked Recording Says*, *Middle East Monitor*, April 20, 2023
<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230420-uae-behind-rsf-attempted-coup-in-sudan-leaked-recording-says/>

⁵⁰ *UAE Mediation Secures Safety of Egyptian Soldiers in Sudan*, *The National*, April 20, 2023
<https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/2023/04/20/uae-mediation-secures-safety-of-egyptian-soldiers-in-sudan/>

⁵¹ *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's News Conference Following his Visit to the United States within the Framework of Russia's Presidency of the UN Security Council*, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia*, April 25, 2023
https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1865546/

⁵² *Statement by Deputy Permanent Representative Anna Evstigneeva at UNSC Briefing on the Situation in Sudan*, April 25, 2023
https://russiaun.ru/en/news/250423_evst

⁵³ *Telegram*, April 25, 2023
<https://t.me/infantmilitario/97212>

⁵⁴ *Telegram*, April 23, 2023
<https://t.me/logikamarkova/6097>

in Sudan favour the RSF's survival as an autonomous force. Yevgeny Prigozhin, the recently deceased head of the Wagner Group, operated northern Sudan's al-Ibadiya gold processing plant, which smuggles gold to Russia through Khartoum Airport, Port Sudan, and Khartoum Airport.⁵⁵ These gold reserves helped finance the Wagner Group's operations in Ukraine and provided hard currency to the sanctions-hit Russian Central Bank. Due to Hemedti's extensive influence over Sudan's gold mining industry, the Wagner Group covertly partook in a gold-for-arms trade with the RSF. On April 23, U.S. officials warned that Prigozhin offered Hemedti surface-to-air missiles from his stockpiles in the Central African Republic.⁵⁶ Although Prigozhin offered to mediate in Sudan and Hemedti denied the presence of Wagner trainers, the RSF allegedly accepted his offer. Shortly before his death in August 2023, RSF militants reportedly provided Prigozhin with gold from Sudan's Songo mine and he vowed to help the RSF prevail.⁵⁷ While Prigozhin's death raised doubts about Moscow's future support for the RSF, his Meroe Gold company and ally Alexander Kuznetsov still operate in Sudan, and there is no sign of a fundamental change in Russian policy.

Despite Wagner's alleged military support for the RSF, Russia still seeks to maintain positive relations with Hemedti. Russian political scientist Evgeny Trifonov highlighted the implausibility of the RSF's takeover in eastern Sudan and Burhan's offer of a Red Sea naval base to Russia as important considerations.⁵⁸ The Russian Foreign and Defence Ministries have entrusted Burhan with overseeing Russia's basing ambitions, as they viewed Hemedti unreliable for revising the lease terms of the Port Sudan base.⁵⁹ The likelihood of prolonged violence in Sudan has indefinitely postponed the base's construction. The popular "Rybar" Telegram channel urged Russia to consider building a low-cost logistics facility in Eritrea instead.⁶⁰ This might cause Burhan's strategic value for Russia to diminish. Burhan's decision to send Deputy Chairman of Sudan's Sovereignty Council Malik Agar to the July 2023 Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg in his place reflects this new reality.

⁵⁵ *Russia is Plundering Gold in Sudan to Bolster Putin's War Effort in Ukraine*, CNN, July 29, 2022
<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/29/africa/sudan-russia-gold-investigation-cmd-intl/index.html>

⁵⁶ *United States Says Wagner Quietly Picked Sides in Sudan*, New York Times, April 23, 2023
<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/23/world/africa/sudan-russia-wagner-group.html>

⁵⁷ *The Last Days of Wagner's Prigozhin*, Wall Street Journal, August 24, 2023
<https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/prigozhin-wagner-plane-crash-last-days-2c44dd5c>

⁵⁸ *Evgeny Trifonov, Sudan umnozhayetsya deleniyem (Sudan Multiplies by Division)*, Vedomosti, May 29, 2023
<https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/columns/2023/05/29/977329-sudan-mnozhitsya-deleniem>

⁵⁹ *Samuel Ramani, As Fighting in Sudan Rages, Russia's Primary Goal is to Restore Authoritarian Rule*, Middle East Institute, May 3, 2023
<https://www.mei.edu/publications/fighting-sudan-rages-russias-primary-goal-ensure-authoritarian-rule>

⁶⁰ *Telegram*, February 27, 2023
<https://t.me/rybar/44041>

A Look Ahead

Nearly eight months into Sudan's civil war, the prospects for a peace settlement are remote. International actors should assume their share of responsibility for Sudan's grim political outlook. The lack of a unified condemnation of Burhan's October 2021 coup, which derailed Sudan's fragile progress towards a democratic transition, placed Sudan on the threshold of full-scale war. The cynical decision of international stakeholders to stoke Hemedti's frictions with Burhan and hedge on the SAF and RSF's capabilities enabled conflict. While external powers avoided the hard alignments that precluded serious conflict resolution talks in Syria and Libya, numerous obstacles persist. The sheer quantity of mediation formats initially restricted scope for a coordinated diplomatic solution. Diplomatic fatigue is now surfacing after successive failed U.S., Saudi and African arbitration efforts. As neither the SAF nor RSF are likely to prevail militarily, the most likely scenario for Sudan is a long war of attrition followed by a power-sharing agreement.

Disclaimer: *The information and views set out in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung or its Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean.*

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