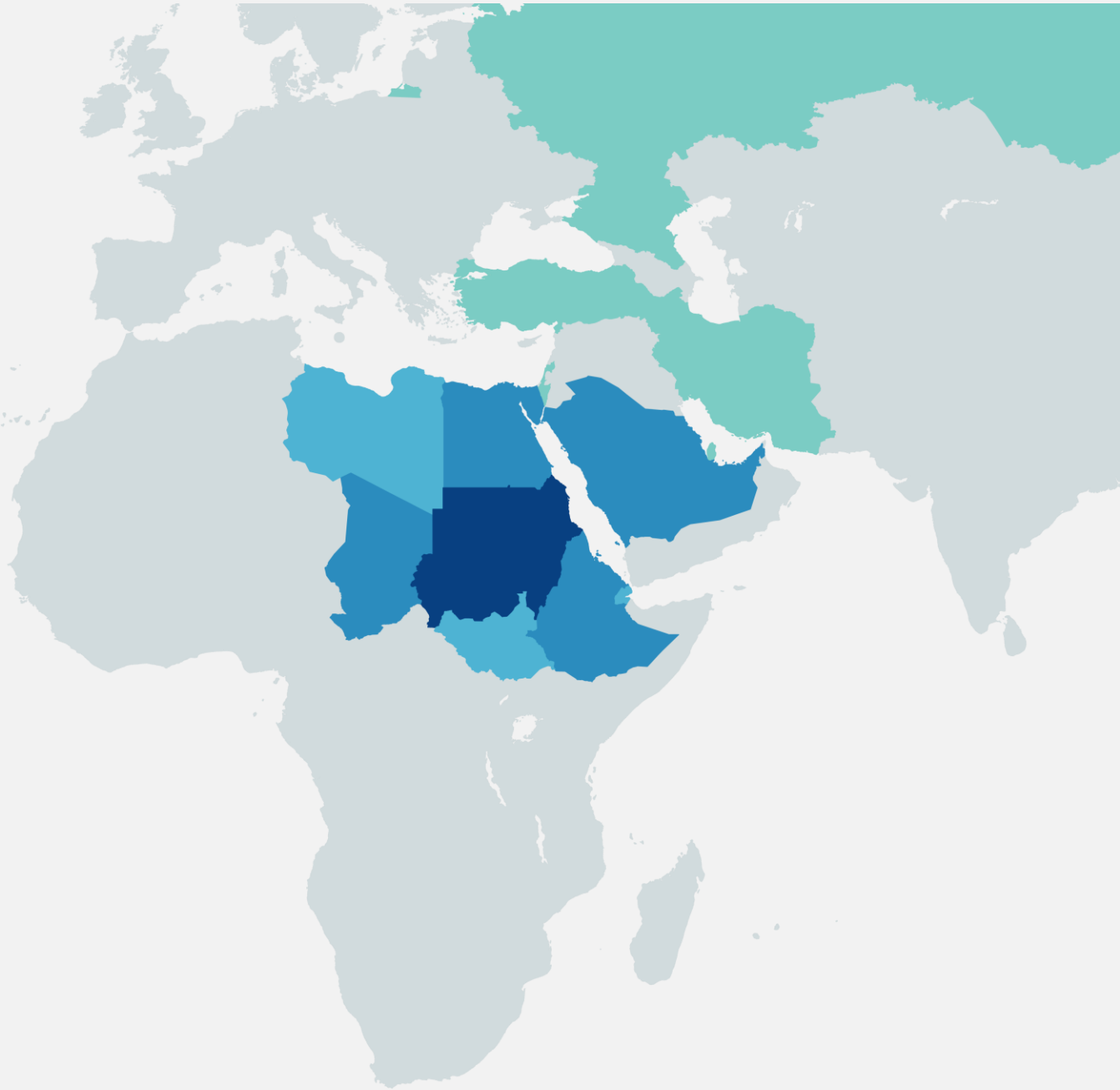


The Roles of External Parties in the April 15 War and Their Interests in Sudan



March 2024

About

Insights is a Sudanese non-governmental organization founded in 2021 following the December Revolution. Our mission is to study and analyze the security and political landscape in Sudan. We address the nation's challenges related to political violence, democratic transition, and social movements by collaborating with civil society, media institutions, and academic centers.

Our team comprises experts in security and political issues, alongside specialists in data collection and analysis. We have established partnerships with both Sudanese and international research and media organizations.

At Insights, we produce periodic reports and research, monitor incidents of violence, protests, and political developments, and present our findings on dashboards. We also conduct virtual webinars on selected issues. Additionally, we implement projects aimed at empowering civil society sectors and fostering positive change.

Our work spans all eighteen states of Sudan, including areas controlled by armed political movements. We strive to build partnerships and facilitate knowledge exchange to deepen the understanding of Sudan's challenges and support its path to democracy.

Author

Aseel Abdalla – aseel.abdalla@insights-sd.org

insights-sd.org
info@insights-sd.org



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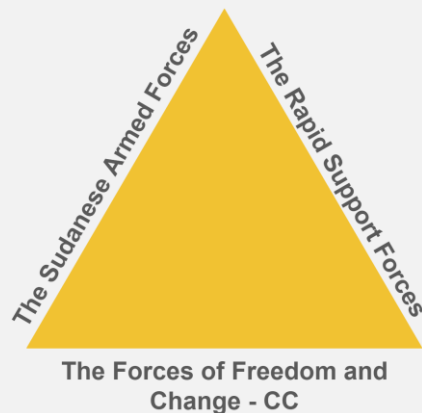
Introduction

The April 15 War is frequently portrayed as a power struggle between two generals, a simplistic narrative that overlooks not only internal factors but also external dynamics and the agendas of foreign nations in Sudan. Numerous countries have vested interests in this resource-rich nation, a pivotal gateway to Africa with a strategic position overlooking the Red Sea facilitating over 12% of global trade. However, what exacerbates the situation is the leadership weakness and intense political polarization since 2019, following the downfall of the Inqaz regime.

Following the December Revolution, Sudan's leadership lacked a cohesive foreign relations strategy. The pillars of power, including the Sudanese army, the Rapid Support Forces, and the Forces of Freedom and Change, each pursued their own connections, attempting to court favor with the Western world after decades of strained relations with Sudan government. Consequently, Sudan neglected its longstanding strategic partnerships with Russia and China, traditionally leveraged by Islamists. Regionally, the conflict revealed biases among several regional actors, indicating the necessity for pre-war coordination and understandings among them.

Neither sides of the war has openly received support from any foreign nation. However, statements from African leaders, investigative reports, and analyses suggest varying degrees of external support for the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces, both politically, and even militarily.

Comprehending the dynamic between external actors and Sudan necessitates an understanding of Sudan's three branches of power after Inqaz, each with its distinct external relations.



Other Sudanese parties play significant roles in Sudan's internal affairs and maintain their own external relations, although their influence is relatively limited:

- Sudanese Islamist Movement.
- Armed movements signatories to Juba Peace Agreement (JPA).
- Sudan People's Liberation Movement led by Abdulaziz al-Hilu (SPLM/al-Hilu).
- Alliance of Forces for Radical Change.
- Sudan Liberation Movement led by Abd al-Wahid Nour (SLM/AW).

Methodology

The methodology of the report analyzes the roles of Egypt, Ethiopia, Chad, Kenya, Libya, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Russia, and the United States of America in the April 15 conflict. The analysis is based on the threats and interests of each of these countries, considering their historical relations with Sudan and their roles during the transitional period from the fall of Omar al-Bashir's regime in April 2019 until the outbreak of the war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces in April 2023.

The report primarily relies on data and statements from open sources, including:

- Government websites
- National news agencies
- Online newspapers
- Official social media pages of relevant leaders

The author established specific criteria for selecting information sources, avoiding those with clear biases or those that publish misleading or unreliable content.

Four direct interviews were conducted as part of the analysis, divided as follows:

- Two interviews with Sudanese researchers
- One interview with an Eritrean researcher
- One interview with a Chadian political dissident.

These interviews were mainly used to support the analysis and cross-check the information gathered from open sources.

The report's analysis is grounded in the "Structural Realism Theory in International Relations," which views the state as the principal actor in international relations in a world lacking a supreme authority capable of resolving disputes, enforcing laws, and compelling states to comply.

The report focuses on the movements and objectives of external actors based on two main factors, prioritized as follows:

- 1- Security challenges that threaten the continuity of regimes and the existence of states.
- 2- Economic interests that external actors seek to secure for prosperity.

1. Egypt

When discussing Sudan's neighboring countries, Egypt emerges as the most significant, given its considerable influence on Sudan and the shared history and destiny of the two nations. Sudan represents the strategic southern depth of Egypt, with its importance to Cairo escalating amidst increasing tensions with Addis Ababa over the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which poses a threat to Egypt's water supply. Historically, Sudan's relationship with its northern neighbor has experienced fluctuations, with the Egyptian government maintaining a consistent strategy towards Sudan for decades. However, the current conflict necessitates a reassessment of this strategy, potentially requiring a new, potentially tactical, approach to address the present challenge.

Cairo has wielded significant external influence over Sudan since its independence. Close relations between the authorities in Cairo and the Sudanese military have provided Sudanese generals with political support, contributing to the stabilization of their rule. In 2019, Cairo was one of the sponsors of the political agreement between the military and civilians. However, its influence waned during the transitional period, it was excluded from the international Quartet Committee. Consequently, Saudi Arabia and the UAE assumed more prominent roles in Sudanese political affairs.

Egypt endeavored to uphold its influence, as reported by The Wall Street Journal in November 2021, when Egyptian intelligence chief Abbas Kamel allegedly urged Burhan to oust Hamdok¹. Subsequently, Burhan arrested members of the civilian government on October 25, 2021, terminating their rule partnership. However, the situation did not unfold as planned. The military leadership failed to establish a new government until the eruption of conflict, indicating a disruption in Egypt's plans. It appears that Egypt's internal challenges and the failure of its political allies to create a new political landscape thwarted the implementation of its agenda.

Following this setback, Cairo's role diminished significantly, remaining relatively inconspicuous until the signing of the Framework Agreement. Subsequently, the Egyptian Intelligence Service convened non-signatories to the Framework Agreement in what became known as the "Sudanese Dialogue" in February 2023². The objective was to broaden the agreement's participation base by involving Forces of Freedom and Change - Democratic Bloc (FFC-DB) and the Democratic Unionist Party led by Mirghani. This initiative aligned with the goals articulated by the Sudanese military leadership at the time, underscoring the continued coordination between Sudanese military leaders and Cairo.

In the current landscape, despite facing myriad obstacles, the Egyptian regime is compelled to take independent political and military measures to uphold the sovereignty of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) over Sudan. The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have consistently maintained a hostile stance toward Egypt since the outbreak of the conflict, with their rebellion originating from the Merowe base, citing the presence of Egyptian forces as a catalyst. Consequently, the RSF detained numerous Egyptian army personnel stationed at the base.

Militarily, The Wall Street Journal reports that the Egyptian Air Force provided support to the SAF by targeting the RSF at the war's onset³. Moreover, Egypt supplied drones to the Sudanese government by the conclusion of 2023, bolstering Sudan's military capabilities⁴.

Politically, Cairo swiftly engaged in diplomatic initiatives. Egyptian President held discussions with the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, conveying Egypt's profound concerns regarding the Sudanese situation. Following that, on May 1, 2023, Cairo convened an Arab summit titled "Supporting Peace and Development in the Republic of Sudan." The summit underscored the necessity of averting the collapse of state institutions in Sudan, portraying the ongoing events as internal affairs and rebuffing external interference. This stance erected an initial barrier against Sudan becoming a theater for overt foreign intervention.

Cairo initiated and hosted the Sudanese Neighboring Countries Summit in July 2023, in parallel with IGAD and the Jeddah Platform. Notably, the summit did not see any representation from the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Its conclusion featured an appeal to both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and RSF to halt hostilities and reject external interference. Cairo's efforts, in contrast to messages from IGAD, bore significant outcomes from the summit. Firstly, it bolstered the SAF's authority over Sudan, countering Abiy Ahmed's claim of a leadership vacuum by ensuring the presence of Malik Agar, Deputy of the Sudanese Sovereignty Council, while the RSF remained absent. Secondly, it undercut the outcomes of the IGAD summit in Addis Ababa, which proposed a discussion for deploying East African countries forces in Sudan for civilian protection. The Cairo summit firmly rejected any external interference.

Cairo also emerged as al-Burhan's primary diplomatic destination since the war's outbreak. Al-Burhan visited Cairo in August 2023 after departing from Khartoum, and again six months later in February 2024. These visits accentuate close coordination between the Egyptian government and the SAF, affirming Egypt's recognition of the SAF as Sudan's legitimate constitutional body responsible for its protection, and viewing Abd al-Fattah al-Burhan as Sudan's legitimate president. Egypt has consistently upheld this stance. However, it stands in contrast to the efforts of certain IGAD countries, headed by Kenya, which have repeatedly sought to undermine this perception. Kenya's recent invitation to Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo "Hemedti," head of the RSF, to participate in the Heads of States Summit held in Kampala on January 18, 2024, exemplified this contrast.

The Egyptian Government has refrained from explicitly declaring categorical support for the SAF. While it has offered significant political support, military assistance has been limited. This cautious approach stems from the uncertainty surrounding the eventual outcome of the conflict. The prospect of a decisive victory for the SAF over the RSF appears unlikely, and Cairo is wary of jeopardizing relations with the RSF, particularly if it maintains a role in Sudan's future political landscape.

Simultaneously, Cairo is motivated to prevent prolonged chaos in its southern neighbor, especially amidst the ongoing conflicts in Libya to the west and Gaza to the north. Ensuring stability in Sudan is essential for Egypt's regional security interests. Additionally, Cairo seeks to maintain a reliable ally in the south, particularly if decided military action regarding GERD.

2. Ethiopia

Sudan and Ethiopia have a long history of tension and mutual interference in internal affairs. The Sudanese government backed the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) against the Mengistu regime (1977-91). In return, the Mengistu regime aided the establishment of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which operated from southern Sudan against the Khartoum government⁵. Bilateral relations since Meles Zenawi's presidency have seen occasional disruptions but have notably improved. Al-Bashir and Meles brokered understandings regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), safeguarding their interests without Egyptian involvement.

Following the fall of the Inqaz government and amidst Khartoum's factional diversity, developments diverged from the conventional ways. In 2019, Abiy Ahmed played a pivotal role in mediating between the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) and the Military Council, culminating in a political agreement in July 2019. This heralded improved relations between the FFC and the Ethiopian government.

Conversely, tensions mounted between the Sudanese armed forces and Ethiopia as Sudan sought to reclaim the Ethiopian-occupied Fashqa lands (2020-2022). Sudan capitalized on Ethiopia's preoccupation with the TPLF conflict. Ethiopia accused Sudan of supporting and harboring TPLF fighters, perceiving it as an act of aggression⁶.

Amid strained relations between commanders of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Ethiopian government, the commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) made diplomatic overtures to Addis Ababa in June 2020 and January 2022, departing from the Sudanese government's official stance.

Since the eruption of the April 15 war, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has engaged in diplomatic dialogues with al-Burhan and Hemedti to peacefully resolve differences and quell the conflict. However, Ethiopia's partiality did not become evident until the IGAD summit convened by Addis Ababa in July 2023, which unveiled several indicators of Abiy Ahmed's favoritism toward the RSF over the SAF.

The initial indicator was the presence of Yousif Ezzat, the political advisor to the RSF, at the summit, coupled with the absence of the Sudanese government delegation. This absence followed Sudan's request to transfer the summit's leadership from Kenya, citing the president's perceived bias in the crisis. Secondly, Abiy Ahmed contested the SAF's leadership of Sudan, asserting a political vacuum and warning of regional consequences⁷. Thirdly, he sought to weaken the SAF militarily by advocating measures to dismantle heavy artillery and impose a no-fly zone. The summit statement proposed the deployment of East African forces in Sudan to safeguard civilians.

The Sudanese government, via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, rebuffed the summit statement, deeming any foreign intervention as hostile. It also expressed bewilderment at the Ethiopian Prime Minister's disavowal of the current Sudanese leadership⁸.

Hemedti's second diplomatic stop after Uganda was Addis Ababa, part of his broader tour that included Kenya, Djibouti, Rwanda, and South Africa in late December 2023⁹. Additionally, Addis Ababa lent

support to RSF's diplomatic endeavors towards reconciliation with “Taquadum,” resulting in the signing of the Addis Ababa Declaration in early January to halt the ongoing war¹⁰.

Considering the historical disputes between Sudan and Ethiopia, it is evident that influential global or regional powers have consistently exacerbated these tensions. During the Cold War era, the most notable conflict between the two nations involved the United States and the Soviet Union. The latter supported the Mengistu regime, advocating socialist principles, while the Numeiri regime aligned with the United States. Presently, Ethiopia's alignment with the UAE mirrors its stance on April 15, as officially accused by the Sudanese government of supporting the RSF. Ethiopia and the UAE boast close ties and strategic agreements. The conflict between the Abiy Ahmed regime and the TPLF underscored the significance of the current Addis Ababa administration to Abu Dhabi, evidenced by military intervention, drone strikes targeting TPLF forces, and weapon supplies to Abiy Ahmed in 2020, as per officials in the Tigray region¹¹.

Moreover, the Addis Ababa administration harbors significant internal motivations concerning the Sudanese issue, notably the border conflict over the Fashaqa land and the GERD. Ethiopia likely stands to gain from the current war's exhaustion of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). It is unlikely to favor Egypt's ally in the Nile water dispute ally emerging victorious and bolstered by popular support. Furthermore, the depletion of SAF capabilities due to the war will likely its readiness to resolve the Fashaqa issue militarily.

3. Chad

Sudan and Chad share a border stretching over 1,400 kilometers, where organized crime and rebel groups proliferate. The internal conflicts of both nations have consistently spilled over into each other's territories, leading to mutual interference in internal affairs.

The relationship between the al-Bashir and Idriss Deby regimes was marked by prolonged tension, with intermittent attempts at reconciliation. Nevertheless, support for rebel factions within each other's borders persisted until 2008 when these rebel groups reached their peak influence in both capitals. In February 2008, N'Djamena faced imminent capture by rebels backed by the Sudanese government, followed by a May attack on Khartoum by the Chad-supported Justice and Equality Movement, which extended as far as Omdurman.

In 2010, al-Bashir and Idriss Deby signed a protocol committing their governments to refrain from harboring rebels from the other side and to establish a joint force of 3,000 soldiers to monitor the border and ensure security and stability.

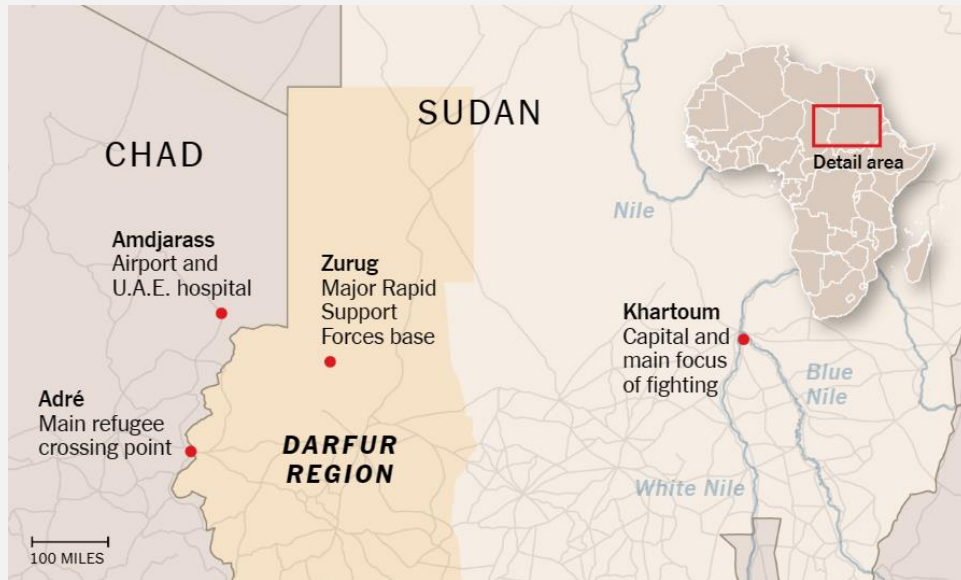
Following al-Bashir's ousting, Chad assumed no clearly defined political role in Sudanese affairs during the transitional period. After the demise of Idriss Deby in April 2021, his son, Mohamed, assumed leadership, focusing on attaining peace and stability in Chad while navigating the transitional phase.

Following the eruption of conflict in Khartoum, Mohamed Deby, head of the Chadian Transitional Council, engaged in telephone discussions on April 17 with al-Burhan and Hemedti, condemning the clashes and urging de-escalation. However, a Chadian diplomat later informed Al Jazeera that the Mohamed Deby government sides with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) against what he termed the Rapid Support militias, citing the security threat it poses to the entire region¹².

The diplomat's remarks contradicted investigations uncovering Chad's support for the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), leveraging its borders with Darfur, the RSF's place of origin. Chad's position shifted alongside a rapidly advancing rapprochement with the UAE, evolving as follows:

- On June 23, memorandums of understanding were inked between Chad and the UAE covering military, energy, and mining sectors, alongside a loan agreement from the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development¹³.
- On June 23, Mohammed Idris met with Mohammed bin Zayed in Abu Dhabi to expand cooperation across all sectors¹⁴.
- On July 23, the UAE established a field hospital in the city of Amdjaras in eastern Chad¹⁵.
- On August 23, the UAE supplied Chad with military machinery and equipment to combat terrorism¹⁶.

A New York Times article exposed that the Amdjaras Hospital, built by the UAE near the Sudanese border and adjacent to the Zuruq military base of the RSF, serves as a hub for transporting military vehicles for the RSF and providing medical treatment to its personnel. Furthermore, it was disclosed that Kornet missiles and drones, which the RSF did not possess until months after the war's onset, were smuggled across the Chadian border¹⁷.



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Following this, N'Djamena hosted a meeting in early July 2023 between the Deputy Commander of the RSF and the leaders of armed movements signatories to the JPA, at the invitation of President Mohamed Deby¹⁹. While sources indicated the meeting's purpose was to discuss the situation in Darfur due to Chad's interest in its eastern borders and security, it however provided an opportunity for reconciliation between the RSF and the JPA's Darfur Track movements, which had long fought against the SAF.

The Sudanese war profoundly impacts Chad more than any other nation. Shifts in power dynamics in Sudan will significantly influence Chad's authority due to substantial ethnic overlap between the two nations and tribal support underpinning the Chadian regime. According to the traditional perspective of the Deby regime, tribal influence is a key determinant of power struggles, and the Sudanese war may signal waves of intense conflict in Chad. A victory by the RSF and subsequent control over Sudan would bolster the influence of the Chadian opposition, which shares tribal connections with Hemedti. And, a defeat of the RSF would likely lead to their retreat to western Sudan, transforming Darfur into a rear base for the Chadian opposition in its conflict with the N'Djamena regime.

However, it appears Mohamed Deby holds a vision distinct from his father's. He aims to strengthen currents within tribes and diminish the influence of tribal blocs. His matrilineal to the Qura'an tribe, a primary opposition to Zaghawa dominance in Chad since 1990, supports him in this endeavor.

This is evidenced by Mohamed Deby's support for the RSF, which poses a threat to the influence of the Justice and Equality Movement and the Sudan Liberation Movement led by Minawi. These movements are predominantly composed of the Zaghawa tribe and had close ties to the Idriss Deby regime, they were utilized by the latter to exert pressure on and weaken the Bashir regime.

Mohamed Deby's support for the RSF, threatening the influence of the Justice and Equality Movement and the Sudan Liberation Movement led by Minawi, predominantly composed of the Zaghawa tribe, reflects this shift. Both Minawi and Jibril announced in mid-November 2023 their alignment with the

SAF against RSF, following Hemedti's forces threatening areas of Zaghawa influence in North Darfur after gaining control of all other four states of Darfur region. This decision cannot be imaged made without prior contact with Mohamed Deby. If Chad's cooperation with the RSF persists, it would indicate Mohamed Deby's departure from tribal connections in Sudan and his father's strategy of consolidating tribal influence both within and outside Chad.

Chad perceives the Sudanese war as an opportunity to undermine longstanding opposition by engaging its fighters in Sudan's conflict against the SAF, which accused RSF of deploying fighters from Chad. Video clips have surfaced showing Chadian flags on combat vehicles in Khartoum, alongside footage documenting Chadian opposition figure Mohamed al-Amin Chochu's involvement in battles in Khartoum²⁰.

4. Kenya

The Kenyan position appeared consistent with Addis Ababa's position at the IGAD summit, in which William Ruto called for the formation of a new leadership in Sudan to get it out of the humanitarian catastrophe it is experiencing, which was denounced by the Sudanese Foreign Ministry²¹.

Kenya did not play a prominent role during the transitional period until Ruto assumed the presidency of Kenya in September 2022. The Kenyan president, whom the Sudanese government considered a non-neutral party, met with the RSF Commander in Nairobi in January 2023 at the invitation of the Kenyan government. The Kenyan President is accused of engaging in gold trades with Hemedti, based on a secret visit to Sudan in February 2020, when he was Vice President of Kenya, revealed by the “Kenya Today” website. During this visit, Ruto toured the gold mining areas in al-Ebaidiya in the River Nile State. “Kenya Today” at the time accused Ruto of involvement in money laundering operations with former President Omar al-Bashir²².

A month after the outbreak of the war, Ruto pledged to arrange a meeting between al-Burhan and Hemedti to end it, but the Sudanese government declined the offer. Sudanese diplomats alleged that the Kenyan president had received financial support from Hemedti during his election campaign²³. RSF Deputy Commander, Abd al-Rahim, appeared in a television interview from Kenya in September 2023. This was preceded by rumors of Hemedti’s presence in Nairobi, which the Kenyan president denied.

5. Libya

Relations between Libya and Sudan have ebbed and flowed over the years, marked by prolonged tensions and occasional conflicts. Both nations have historically supported military factions opposed to each other. Since the fall of Gaddafi, illicit cross-border trade has thrived, transforming the border into a significant conduit for human trafficking, as well as the smuggling of oil and weapons. Sudanese militias are known to operate within Libya, engaging in activities ranging from smuggling to serving as mercenaries aligned with various Libyan political factions.

Politically, Hemedti and Haftar, who controls the eastern side of Libya, have had strong relations predating the conflict. Besides their collaboration with Wagner and the UAE²⁴, both parties have engaged in joint coordination efforts. In 2019, Hemedti dispatched 1,000 fighters to support Haftar's bid to seize Tripoli²⁵, despite Sudan's recognition of the internationally recognized Government of National Accord in Tripoli. In Addition, Siddiq Haftar, Khalifa Haftar's eldest son, met with Hemedti three months prior to the outbreak of the war. Siddiq clarified that the meeting was personal and not driven by political objectives.

At the outset of the RSF-SAF conflict, the Wall Street Journal reported that Haftar dispatched a plane carrying military equipment to support Hemedti, aiming for a swift victory on Hemedti's side²⁶.

Observers argue that prolonging the Sudan war would not serve the interests of Libyans as a whole. It would likely exacerbate the presence of armed groups along the border between the two countries, where oversight is lacking, fostering illegal activities. Furthermore, Haftar's backing of the RSF poses a threat to his relationship with Egypt, his eastern neighbor and a key ally. The goals of the UAE and Egypt differ and conflict in this context, and Haftar is unlikely to jeopardize the interests of any of his regional allies.

6. Eritrea

Eritrea and Sudan share a border spanning over 600 kilometers and have had intertwined political relations since Eritrea gained independence in 1993. Sudan played a significant role in supporting Eritrean separatists during their conflict with the Ethiopian government until the EPLF defeated Ethiopian forces and achieved independence²⁷. However, relations soured rapidly following Eritrea's independence. The Inqaz Government established recruitment camps within Sudan for Eritrean jihadists opposing the rule of Isaias Afwerki²⁸. In return, Asmara openly provided military support to rebel movements in both southern and northern Sudan²⁹.

Tensions between the two countries persisted without improvement until 2006, when Asmara sponsored the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement between the Government and the Eastern Sudan Front³⁰. This agreement followed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the SPLM and the Government of Sudan in 2005. However, relations deteriorated once more at the beginning of 2018 when deposed President Omar al-Bashir unilaterally closed the border. Sudan claimed it took this action to limit illegal immigration and asserted that it was working with Eritrea in this effort.

After the December Revolution, an Eritrean delegation visited Khartoum in May 2019, and Asmara announced its support for change in Sudan. Eritrea reopened its borders with Sudan, which had been closed since the beginning of 2018. During the transitional period in Sudan, Eritrea maintained a neutral stance and directed its attention towards issues in eastern Sudan, given the significant ethnic overlap between the two countries. Asmara's primary interest lay in the Eastern Sudan Track of the JPA, where it exerted considerable focus.

Following tribal conflicts erupted in eastern Sudan involving ethnic groups with extensions in Eritrea, the Asmara regime became concerned that the violence could escalate and spill over into Eritrea. Asmara took proactive steps by participating in the matter, extending invitations through its embassy in Khartoum to numerous political, civil, and religious leaders from eastern Sudan in July and August 2022. The aim was to convene a forum, sponsored by President Isaias Afwerki, to address the issues concerning the eastern region. The Sudanese government abruptly halted the forum's proceedings and barred the invited leaders from crossing the border into Eritrea. This action was taken due to the absence of a representative from the Sudanese government in the delegation, and Asmara failed to adequately coordinate with Khartoum beforehand.

In the aftermath of the war, Eritrea's approach to diplomacy has been characterized by a people-centric strategy, aiming to facilitate Sudanese entry into Eritrean territory without cumbersome procedures. In a televised interview with Isaias Afwerki in May 2023 on Eritrean television, he extended a warm welcome to the Sudanese people, urging them to seek refuge in Eritrea until they could overcome their challenges³¹. Subsequently, in September 2023, a political delegation comprising members of the FFC-DB and civil leaders supporting the SAF visited Asmara at the invitation of the Eritrean government³². This gesture potentially indicated Asmara's inclination towards supporting the SAF at that time.

Eritrea maintains a keen interest in various aspects of Sudanese affairs, with particular emphasis on the security situation in eastern Sudan and the sizable population of Eritrean refugees residing in Sudan,

numbering over 250,000³³. The Eritrean regime is apprehensive about the possibility of these refugees streaming uncontrollably into Eritrea. Isaias Afwerki governs Eritrea with a firm security grip, demonstrating a propensity to eliminate any potential sources of insecurity, whether internal or external. Due to Eritrea's strained international and regional relations, the regime opts not to rely on foreign policy or regional organizations for problem-solving, preferring direct engagement with perceived threats.

Asmara approaches the security situation in eastern Sudan with utmost caution. While the Eritrean government refrained from openly supporting any party until the end of 2023, recent actions indicate clear leaning towards the SAF. Isaias Afwerki's criticism of political initiatives aimed at equating the legitimacy of the SAF and the RSF in resolving the “Sudan War” underscores this inclination, characterizing such efforts as mere political bazaars³⁴.

In January 2024, Darfur 24 website disclosed that the Sudan Liberation Movements led by Minawi and the Popular Front for Liberation and Justice had established training camps within Eritrean territory³⁵. This development followed the entry of the RSF into and subsequent control over the al-Jazeera state in December 2023, thereby bringing it closer to the border state of al-Qadarif with Ethiopia.

Asmara's alignment with the SAF is driven by its apprehension of the RSF nearing its borders, particularly after their control over al-Jazeera state and subsequent movement towards al-Qadarif in January 2024. This dynamic gives Ethiopia a strategic partner controlling the western flank of the Eritrean border. Eritrea's concern is further compounded by Ethiopia's pursuit of access to the Red Sea, heightening tensions. In October 2023, the Ethiopian Prime Minister underscored the existential importance of Red Sea access for Ethiopia, emphasizing “*a 150 million population can't live in a geographical prison*” and warning of potential escalation if left unresolved³⁶. In a confidential meeting with businessmen, Abiy Ahmed acknowledged Ethiopia's readiness to resort to force to secure a Red Sea port if diplomatic avenues prove futile³⁷.



Asmara perceives itself threatened by Addis Ababa's ambitions. Despite the peace agreement signed between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2019, which concluded two decades of conflict between the nations; and their collaborative efforts against the TPLF (November 2020 - November 2022) mutual trust remains tenuous. This distrust has been exacerbated by Abiy Ahmed's statements and pro Addis Ababa regime X accounts assert territorial claims over the land in the Eritrean port of Massawa.

If the RSF were to seize control of al-Qadarif, it would establish a new supply route with Ethiopia and advance towards Kassala, which shares a border with Eritrea. This development would diminish the Afwerki regime's ability to leverage its Sudanese borders to deter potential Ethiopian aggression aimed at gaining control of the port of Assab.

7. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates

During Omar al-Bashir's tenure, Sudan maintained a relatively positive relationship with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, albeit punctuated by occasional tensions. Much of this friction stemmed from the Islamist orientation of al-Bashir's government and its ties with Qatar, Iran, and Turkey. However, Sudan's ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE saw unprecedented strengthening following the secession of South Sudan, which resulted in the Khartoum government losing three-quarters of its oil production and half of its financial revenues³⁸. This economic upheaval prompted a shift in Sudan's foreign policy, drawing it closer to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who provided substantial economic support. Sudan notably scaled back its relationship with Iran in 2014 and, in 2015, joined Saudi Arabia's military Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen against the Ansar Allah group (Houthis), aligned with Iran.

In exchange for his participation in Decisive Storm, al-Bashir received aid totaling \$3.1 billion in two installments since 2015. Sudanese troops played a crucial role in securing Saudi Arabia's southern border, with the RSF serving as the primary ground force against Ansar Allah operations. Throughout this period, both al-Burhan and Hemedti gained recognition from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Al-Burhan was reportedly tasked with supervising Sudanese troops in Yemen, and Hemedti, Commander of the RSF that controls Jabel Amer, Africa's third-largest gold mine, as reported by Reuters³⁹. Following these developments, Hemedti's commercial ties with the UAE expanded, leading to independent political and commercial relations. This, in turn, solidified Hemedti's position as one of Sudan's most influential political figures.

During the transitional period, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi played important roles in installing the new regime in the country and promoting it abroad. In May 2020, they deposited \$500 million in the Central Bank of Sudan, and Riyadh mediated with the Washington government to discuss removing Sudan from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism to facilitate Sudan's debt relief and attract foreign investments. The UAE also hosted meetings between officials from Sudan and Israel and coordinated al-Burhan's meeting with Netanyahu in Entebbe, Uganda, in February 2020. Sudan, represented by Nasr ad-Din Abd al-Bari, the Minister of Justice then, signed the Abraham Agreement in January 2021, led by the UAE in the region, for normalization with Israel.

KSA and the UAE's support for the transitional government did not proceed smoothly on all fronts, particularly concerning economic support, which came with political conditions, akin to the situation during the final stages of al-Bashir's rule. According to Sudan Tribune, in March 2020, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi halted an aid package worth \$3 billion that they had pledged to Sudan after depositing third of it. Sudan Tribune reported that aid was suspended due to directives from the US, which required civilian leadership to assume power and the military to withdraw⁴⁰. However, analysts observed that the two countries were not eager to support a government comprising a wide array of political blocs and parties, some of which have explicitly opposed the policies of the Saudi and UAE leadership.

The roles of Saudi Arabia and the UAE diverged after April 15. While Saudi Arabia aims to achieve stability, there are numerous reports indicating the UAE's support for Hemedti, leading to growing popular discontent with its involvement in Sudan. Saudi Arabia, working through the Sudan Quad

Committee, which also includes the UAE, the US, and the UK, is leading mediation efforts between the SAF and the RSF via the Jeddah platform, in close coordination with Washington. Meanwhile, the UAE's role in these negotiations is marginal.

7.1 KSA after April 15

Riyadh has refrained from siding with either party and has adopted a cautious approach in its rhetoric since the outbreak of the conflict. It has prioritized humanitarian and diplomatic efforts and has taken the lead in the Jeddah platform. Saudi Arabia's approach to the Sudanese issue revolves around three primary concerns: safeguarding security in the Red Sea, exerting significant influence over Sudan, and bolstering its reputation as a paramount regional actor in the eyes of both the international and regional communities.

Firstly, Riyadh places great emphasis on the security of the Red Sea, recognizing that any disruption to its stability could jeopardize its economy, particularly as the port of Jeddah accounts for 75% of its maritime trade. The significance of the Red Sea to Saudi leadership has been further amplified by initiatives like the NEOM project -Saudi Vision 2030- led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman⁴¹. The NEOM project aspires to transform Saudi Arabia into a leading economic and tourist destination, reshaping its global image, attracting significant investments, and amplifying Saudi Arabia's cultural influence in the Middle East and beyond. Within Vision 2030, there are plans to develop the Red Sea ports and position Saudi Arabia as a global logistics hub. Therefore, Saudi Arabia is motivated to prevent a complete collapse of the Sudanese state, which could imperil its trade security and its broader regional vision.

Secondly, Riyadh aims to consolidate its influence on Sudan, as evidenced by its marginalization of Egypt's role, despite Egypt being most affected by developments in Sudan throughout the transitional period. Saudi Arabia seeks to ensure that Sudanese leadership prioritizes its security and economic interests, particularly following agreements signed by al-Bashir with Turkey and Russia in 2017, granting them a military foothold on the Red Sea. The fall of al-Bashir presents an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to expand its influence in Sudan and mitigate similar threats in the future.

Economically, Riyadh has shown significant interest in Africa to advance its ambitious plans for diversifying its sources of income, with the Port of Port Sudan holding particular importance in this context. A report by Madameek revealed that in November 2022, Saudi Arabia exerted pressure on the Sudanese government through the Organization of Islamic Cooperation after Sudan signed an agreement with Qatar to establish railways from Port Sudan to Adre, as part of the competition to acquire control over the Port in eastern Sudan⁴².

Thirdly, Saudi Arabia is enhancing its global stature by actively engaging in the Sudanese crisis. This involvement strengthens the United States' confidence in Saudi Arabia as an indispensable regional player and facilitates close coordination with Washington on Sudanese affairs to safeguard American interests amid Russian ambitions in the Red Sea and Moscow's expanding influence in Africa. Saudi

officials are approaching the Sudanese situation cautiously, aligning with Washington's preferences. While Riyadh's strategy does not prioritize spreading democracy or enhancing public freedoms, and sometimes impedes such efforts in the region, it is adhering to US wishes to transfer power in Sudan entirely to civilian authorities. And as proven, Riyadh has already halted aid pledged to Khartoum under the pretext of military dominance over governance in Sudan.

Indeed, Riyadh has additional considerations in its approach to the Sudanese issue. Saudi Arabia holds investments totaling approximately \$4 billion in Sudan, primarily concentrated in the agricultural sector⁴³. These agricultural investments have gained increased significance for Saudi Arabia, particularly as it imports a majority of its food supplies, a concern exacerbated by the Russian-Ukrainian war and the subsequent doubling of food prices. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is unlikely to desire a scenario where the SAF achieve a decisive victory over the RSF, which constitute the core force securing its southern borders, without ensuring a competent alternative to fill the void left by the RSF.

The Sudanese government - the SAF - is actively seeking to garner support from Riyadh, employing various strategies such as offering assurances or engaging in closer ties with Iran, its primary rival. The Sudanese government has already stepped toward the latter as the Sudanese Foreign Ministry recently announced the restoration of relations with Tehran after a seven-year hiatus, a move aimed at appeasing Riyadh⁴⁴.

7.2 UAE after April 15

The UAE's stance at the onset of the war showed no bias toward either side. However, as the conflict persisted, numerous reports confirmed its military support for the RSF. The UAE holds a vision distinct from that of Saudi Arabia, and its involvement in Sudan encompasses not only the SAF and the RSF but also the FFC.

The UAE has maintained close diplomatic ties with the Sudanese government since the al-Bashir era and has furthered its commercial and political relations with Hemedti following the RSF's involvement in the Yemen conflict. Furthermore, after the December Revolution, the UAE expanded its engagement with civilians at the beginning of the transitional period.

On April 18, 2019, Khalid Omer Yousif, Secretary-General of the Sudanese Congress Party, visited Abu Dhabi and held discussions with Emirati officials, as reported by al-Jamaheer newspaper⁴⁵. Additionally, a report by The New York Times in late April 2019 disclosed that five Sudanese opposition factions convened in the UAE's capital for consultations aimed at forging a governing partnership between the military and civilians⁴⁶, which materialized later in August of the same year. Subsequently, both publicly acknowledged and clandestine visits of civilian leaders to the UAE persisted throughout and beyond their tenure. Anadolu Agency further revealed that former Prime Minister Hamdok has been residing in Abu Dhabi since his resignation in January 2022⁴⁷.

While the UAE is a part of the Sudan Quad Committee, organizing the Jeddah Platform led by Saudi Arabia, its role within it is marginal, with its efforts diverging from Riyadh's pursuit of a swift ceasefire.

Several reports, notably The New York Times, have revealed the UAE's support for Hemedti across Chad and Libya⁴⁸. The UAE swiftly moved to enhance its relationship with the government of Chad, aiming to establish a military base for the RSF, which elucidates Mohamed Deby's abrupt shift in position. In November 2023, General Yasir al-Atta, a member of the Sovereignty Council, openly criticized the UAE, denouncing it as a criminal and terrorist state due to its backing of the RSF⁴⁹. Subsequently, popular demonstrations erupted in Port Sudan, demanding the expulsion of the Emirati Ambassador⁵⁰. The hashtag "#الإمارات تقتل السودانيين" (UAE_kills_Sudanese) gained traction on Twitter, with tens of thousands of Sudanese and Arabs engaging with it.

To understand the Emirati role in Sudan, it's crucial to grasp its motivating factors, its perception of threats, and its positioning within the region and globally. Abu Dhabi aspires to wield significant influence in the region, safeguarding the interests of major powers, notably the West, amidst the volatile Middle East landscape. Additionally, it views political Islam movements and the Muslim Brotherhood as existential threats to its regime's longevity.

To secure the interests of major powers in the region, Abu Dhabi adopts a pragmatic approach involving engagement with the US, Russia, and China. The US stands as its strategic security ally, and the UAE government actively advances Washington's interests in the region, taking bold strides towards reshaping the Middle East with itself in a prominent role. This was exemplified by the normalization of relations with Israel and the fostering of popular ties between Emirati and Israeli citizens. The UAE's pragmatism extends to its dealings with Russia, despite the latter being a rival to the US. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequent economic sanctions, including restrictions on its banking system and currency, Russia turned to the UAE dirham to facilitate its oil revenue collection⁵¹, which constitutes a primary income source for Moscow.

Officials in Abu Dhabi have long been cognizant of the security threats facing the small country, particularly from its hostile neighbor Iran, which maintains a presence on two islands claimed by the UAE. However, two key factors have propelled the UAE to take bold steps in recent years: Firstly, the diminishing presence of its most significant security partner, the US⁵², in the Middle East, leaving the small country vulnerable to the threats posed by Iran and Turkey. Secondly, the Arab Spring revolutions, which led to the overthrow of four governments out of the six countries where they erupted, with Islamist groups coming to power in three. The UAE was not immune to the repercussions of the Arab Spring, evidenced by a failed coup attempt in 2011 involving Prince Hamdan bin Zayed, who has ties to Islamist groups⁵³. This attempt played a pivotal role in Abu Dhabi's decision to wage war against the Muslim Brotherhood, aiming to eradicate its influence from the region.

To fortify its position in the region, the UAE strives to cement itself as a pivotal commercial hub and strategic ally for major powers, safeguarding their economic interests. To achieve this objective, it capitalizes on its ports as strategic assets, positioning itself as a crucial guarantor of global trade security.

Over the years, the UAE, primarily through the Dubai Ports Company, which oversees over 70 marine terminals across seven continents, has pursued the management of additional ports worldwide. It turned

its focus to Africa, a continent rich in resources, but its efforts in Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti faltered despite substantial investments, leading to the expulsion of the UAE's delegation from these three nations. Prior to the eruption of conflict, the UAE had inked a \$6 billion agreement with the Sudanese government which included overseeing and developing the Abu Amama Port in Red Sea state⁵⁴. Given its strategic position overlooking the Red Sea, the UAE is eager to ensure the success of this endeavor.

Abu Dhabi's bet on the RSF, should they triumph over the SAF, serves several strategic objectives, notably securing a foothold on the Red Sea coast and purging Islamist elements from the SAF as part of its broader strategy to eradicate Islamist movements in the region.

Furthermore, the UAE's interests in Sudan extend beyond military alliances. It shares Saudi Arabia's quest for agricultural lands to bolster its food security. Additionally, Dubai serves as one of the world's primary markets for anonymous gold, rendering it essential for gold mines in Sudan⁵⁵. Sudan ranks as the tenth largest gold producer globally, boasting one of the largest gold reserves worldwide, thereby making it the UAE's second-largest source of gold⁵⁶.

8. Russia

Russia maintained close relations with the al-Bashir regime across economic, political, military, and cultural spheres. These ties were further solidified by the United States' designation of Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism from 1993 to 2020. Russia served as a significant arms supplier to the SAF, with cooperation between the two nations reaching its peak in 2017. During this time, al-Bashir visited Moscow and held talks with Vladimir Putin, seeking protection from “potential US aggression against Sudan” as he described it.

In December of the same year, an official Russian newspaper published an agreement between Russia and Sudan, granting Moscow access to a naval facility on the Red Sea⁵⁷. However, following the fall of al-Bashir in 2019, the agreement was not fully implemented on the ground. Moscow faced challenges in persuading al-Burhan, who sought closer ties with the US, to proceed with fulfilling the terms of the agreement.

Despite these challenges, relations between the Kremlin and the transitional government continued without interruption. Sudan, along with 17 other countries, voted against a UN General Assembly resolution urging Russia to end its occupation of Crimea⁵⁸. Additionally, high-level visits occurred between the two nations. In February 2022, Hemedti visited Moscow, just one day before the commencement of Russian operations in Ukraine. Almost a year later, in February 2023, the Russian Foreign Minister traveled to Khartoum to discuss the Red Sea facility issue and to coordinate positions in international forum⁵⁹s.

A report released by CNN in July 2022 disclosed that Moscow, through the Wagner Group, had reached an agreement with Sudanese generals concerning gold transactions worth billions of dollars. Russia is utilizing these gold reserves to mitigate the impact of economic sanctions imposed on it⁶⁰.

Russia initially maintained a neutral stance at the beginning of the conflict and continued its relationship with both the SAF and the RSF. While the SAF sought recognition of its legitimacy as Sudan's official and regular army, Deputy of the Sovereignty Council Malik Agar visited Moscow in June 2023⁶¹. Meanwhile, Wagner Group allegedly supplied the RSF with military missiles, as accused by the US⁶².

The SAF appears conflicted in its relationship with Russia. Despite seeking Moscow's support, which backs the RSF through Wagner, the SAF reportedly sought assistance from the Ukrainian army in combating the RSF and Wagner in Sudan⁶³. This indicates that Moscow maintains open relations with both parties due to its distinct interests with each.

Currently, Moscow prioritizes the gold supplier whose mines in Sudan are controlled by the RSF commander and his family. This supplier has its role in financing Moscow's operations in Ukraine. However, Russia's strategic objective in Sudan is to establish a foothold on the Red Sea, making it not inclined toward gambling its historical ties with the SAF, which controls the eastern side of the country.

9. The United States of America

The United States wielded significant influence over Sudanese affairs prior to the secession of South Sudan in 2011, particularly through its pivotal role in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Following South Sudan's secession, Washington, guided by Princeton Lyman, the US special envoy to Sudan from March 2011 to March 2013, envisioned a governance model for northern Sudan aimed at ending the cycle of violence and fostering comprehensive political consensus among the ruling regime, political parties, and armed movements⁶⁴.

Despite the promises and efforts of the al-Bashir government to initiate a comprehensive national dialogue, Lyman's vision failed to materialize. Consequently, US interest in Sudan waned until the December 2019 revolution. However, following the revolution, Washington's interest in Sudan experienced a resurgence. Relations between the two countries significantly improved after Sudan reached an agreement to compensate the victims of the USS Cole destroyer attack. Additionally, Sudan's signing of an agreement to normalize relations with Israel led to its removal from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Throughout the transitional period, the United States maintained pressure on Sudan generals to complete democratic transformation. Economic support from the US was contingent upon reaching a final agreement between the military and civilians that grants full authority to civilian forces. Today, the United States and Saudi Arabia are leading the Jeddah Platform initiative, which concluded in the first month of the war with the signing of an initial agreement of principles between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces. While the agreement did not result in a ceasefire, it did establish commitments to respect international humanitarian law and refrain from actions that harm civilians.

The US holds both concerns and aspirations regarding Sudan. Primarily, it seeks a leadership composed of liberal and secular parties that view the US as a model of democracy to emulate. This stance originates from its longstanding classification of the previous Inqaz Government as a rogue and antagonistic regime. Viewing the December Revolution as an opportunity to bolster its influence in the region, the US actively engaged through its membership in the Sudan Quad, alongside Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the UK. It consistently urged Sudanese parties to advance the Framework Agreement.

Furthermore, the US heightened its diplomatic presence by appointing John Godfrey, renowned for his proficiency in Arabic, as ambassador to Khartoum, marking the first US ambassador in nearly 25 years. However, the US harbors apprehensions about Sudan reverting to governance by anti-west forces that align with Iran, China, and Russia. Particularly concerning is the potential establishment of a naval facility in eastern Sudan by Russia, raising red flags for Washington.

Moreover, Washington fears that prolonged conflict in Sudan could precipitate chaos and instability in the region, jeopardizing the security of the Red Sea and facilitating the expansion of terrorism from neighboring Somalia and Yemen.

Since the conflict began, Washington has imposed sanctions on various companies supporting the SAF and the RSF, as well as on multiple individuals. Among these individuals, the most notable is Abd ar-

Rahim Daglo, RSF Deputy Commander and Hemedti's brother. His forces are accused of human rights violations, ethnic killings, and sexual violence carried out by their forces. Sanctions were also imposed on the Secretary-General of the Islamist Movement and former Foreign Minister, Ali Karti, for allegedly obstructing efforts to achieve a ceasefire agreement. These actions, according to the US National Security Advisor, aim to hold accountable those responsible for undermining peace, security, and stability efforts in Sudan.

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