Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	**483**
Land:	Libyen
Kilde:	Rift Valley Institute
Titel:	Sudan Conflict: Assessing the risk of regionalization
Udgivet:	31. juni 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	7. november 2023

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XCEPT
CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

SUDAN CONFLICT: ASSESSING THE RISK OF REGIONALIZATION

SUDAN RAPID RESPONSE BRIEFING 2 • JUNE 2023

This paper focuses on the potential for a regionalization of the conflict between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), including external involvement by Sudan's neighbours and cross-border spill-over. It is the second in a series of briefing papers from Rift Valley Institute for the UK government's XCEPT (Cross-Border Conflict, Evidence, Policy and Trends) programme looking at the conflict. The first briefing paper – 'Hemedti challenges SAF's control over Sudan' – was published in May 2023.

KEY POINTS

- There has been limited regional engagement in Sudan's conflict and there are currently strong disincentives for involvement. For now, most regional states are hedging their bets and pushing for greater regional engagement in mediation efforts and an eventual peace negotiation.
- Due to strong economic links and connections between their populations, conflicts in Sudan tend to affect South Sudan deeply. Juba remains hugely dependent on oil revenue and is vulnerable to any disruption of oil exports through Port Sudan. South Sudan is therefore adopting a neutral stance, even offering to mediate the conflict.
- For Chad the conflict poses significant challenges due to close ethnic and economic cross-border linkages; the history of conflict spill-over during the war in Darfur; and Hemedti's connections with Chadian Arab communities. The RSF's connections in CAR and with the Wagner Group also represent a security risk.
- Early support for the RSF from Libya's General Haftar is the most significant example of external interference to date. While many Darfuri armed groups, and the RSF, have operated in Libya, weaker transboundary ethnic connections and Haftar's close relations to Egypt are likely to limit engagement.
- Egypt has close links to the SAF and significant long-term strategic interests in Sudan. Ethiopia's long-term interests in Sudan run counter to Cairo's and are exacerbated by security concerns along the border, including both recent hostilities over Fashaga and the conflict in Tigray.
- For Eritrea, the main incentive for involvement in the conflict would be as leverage over Khartoum due to its relationship with Ethiopia's TPLF and also Eritrean opposition groups. But SAF's dominance in eastern Sudan, and the fact that fighting has mainly been in Khartoum and further west, lower the likelihood of external interference from the east.
- The arrival of large numbers of refugees into several of Sudan's neighbours – particularly South Sudan and Chad – will likely put a strain on areas with scarce resources, leading to localized tensions.

INTRODUCTION

As the fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by General Dagalo (Hemedti), enters its ninth week, fears grow that a protracted war will lead to the 'regionalization' of the conflict. This regionalization could include external political and military support from neighbouring states to either party – escalating and prolonging the violence – and cross-border spill-over from the conflict that could destabilize an already fragile and conflict-prone region. Whilst the latter has to a degree already started, with over 476,000 refugees fleeing largely into Egypt, Chad and South Sudan, to date there seems less appetite than expected for external involvement in the war as many neighbouring countries watch and wait to see how the conflict develops.[1] This, however, could easily change due to a history of support by Sudan and its neighbours to each other's armed opposition combined with significant and often competing regional interests that create potential conditions and motives for external interference. Furthermore, some regional actors, for example Egypt, have much closer relationships to one of the warring factions than the other, with relationships between the parties and external actors often reflecting competition between international actors.

A FRAGILE AND WARY NEIGHBOURHOOD

Thus far, a combination of mutual vulnerability to cross-border insecurity, domestic fragility across the region, and shared economic interests seems to be disincentivizing Sudan's neighbours from actively supporting SAF or RSF either directly or through proxies. The current unpredictability of the outcome of the conflict, particularly RSF's unexcepted military successes and fierce contestation of Khartoum, has exacerbated these dynamics. The risks and rewards of non-state actors becoming engaged are different, making engagement both more probable and more unpredictable. In addition, the growing spill-over of the conflict is likely to destabilize immediate border areas at the local level that could have national level repercussions for Sudan's neighbours. Each neighbour has different motivations and interests.

South Sudan

Sudan's latest conflict presents both a risk and an opportunity to the government of South Sudan. Historically, Khartoum has provided military and political support to armed groups opposed to the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) and later the government in Juba, while the SPLA/M has close relationships to Sudanese rebel groups, in particular the SPLA/M-North. However, in recent years the dynamic changed and instead of fuelling each other's conflicts both countries have become involved in each other's peace

1 As of 6 June, the IOM estimated the conflict had forced 476,811 people to flee across Sudan's borders, including over 205,000 into Egypt, over 125,000 into Chad and over 90,000 into South Sudan. However, these figures are dwarfed by the almost 1 million internally displaced. See IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, Sudan Situation Report 7, 6 June 2023, https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/iom-displacement-tracking-matrix-sudan-situation-report-7-6-june-2023

processes. Khartoum played a key role in mediating the South's Revitalised peace agreement in 2018, while Juba was mediator and guarantor to Sudan's 2020 Juba Peace Agreement.[2] This shift was based on a shared need to prioritize internal stability and isolate opposition groups, as well as mutual economic dependence on oil revenues. These twin concerns remain crucial and are likely to shape Juba's engagement with the current conflict.

Both the SAF and RSF have sent representatives to Juba to court President Kiir. On 17 May Hemedti's political advisor, Yousif Ibrahim Izzat, publicly met with Kiir, resulting in an official reprimand towards Juba by the SAF government. On 22 May, just three days after replacing Hemedti as vice-chair of the Sovereign Council, Malik Agar of the SPLM/A-N (SRF), also met Kiir.[3] Both SAF and RSF want to prevent South Sudan from providing military support to the other side or encouraging former allies to enter the conflict, although neither the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) nor SLA/M of Abdul Wahid have a strong interest in supporting either party. Furthermore, neither SAF nor RSF want, for now, a security vacuum and greater instability along the border.[4] South Sudan may, in fact, benefit in the short-term as the conflict is likely to further reduce the risk of Sudanese support to opposition groups. Juba is therefore trying to keep an equal distance between the parties, with President Kiir initially offering to mediate between the warring factions on behalf of IGAD.[5]

Despite their desire to stay as neutral as possible, the conflict in Sudan poses significant economic concerns, which could have huge political implications. Revenue from oil export through Sudan's pipeline and eventually Port Sudan continues to provide almost 90 per cent of South Sudan's budget.[6] So far, the SAF-RSF conflict has not disrupted oil exports, but this could change – specifically if the belligerents seek to weaponize Juba's concerns. Initially for SAF, who control Port Sudan, keeping the oil flowing will be an important economic asset, which means keeping Juba onside, or on the side-lines. At some point, however, SAF may see the value in threatening to close oil exports if they felt it would compel Juba to support them. The RSF, who control the al-Jaili refinery north of Khartoum where the two pipelines come together, could take a similar action to compel Juba's support. Actions by either party to disrupt this would almost certainly push Juba to take a side – without this revenue South Sudan would face serious economic consequences.

2 The GoSS was also the mediator of unsuccessful talks with the SPLM-N al-Hilu and currently hosts Abdul Wahid's SLA/M in Juba.

3 Agar is also trying to position himself as a neutral actor between the parties. He has been critical of the conflict and stated that his goal in his new position is to reconcile the parties and work towards peace.

4 Juba moved to de-escalate the risk of conflict in greater Upper Nile by reaching out to Johnson Olony, formerly supported and hosted by Khartoum, and starting the process of reintegrating him into the SSPDF earlier in May. Not only does this decrease a key military threat, but it also further isolates First Vice President Machar and reduces a potential source of military support.

5 While the RSF welcomed the IGAD initiative, SAF were less enthusiastic, and thus talks were started in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

6 International Monetary Fund, 'Republic of South Sudan: 2022 Article IV Consultation And Second Review Under The Staff-Monitored Program', August 2022, 2. Juba also relies on other revenue streams such as loans from pre-sold oil and IMF loans, which help ease dependence on oil revenues.

Chad

The SAF-RSF conflict presents an extra challenge to Chad's president, Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno (known as Mahamat Kaka), who is trying to manage a contested and fragile political process stemming from the death of his father in April 2021. In the short-term, the internal interests of Chad's ruling military junta are to resist a transition to civilian democratic rule and prevent foreign-based rebel groups from finding external support—ensuring internal stability and security along its border is necessary for both. With regards to the SAF-RSF conflict, N'Djamena's priority is to prevent spill-over into Chad and maintain control over its borders rather than becoming actively engaged. Since Mahamat Kaka's political ascension, his relationship with SAF has been much stronger than with Hemedti, whose own political ambitions for Chad involve political prominence of his Arab kin.[7]

When violence erupted in Khartoum, Chad immediately closed its border to Darfur, which remains the case for all but refugees. In some ways this non-interference is a policy decision in itself and benefits SAF as it prevents the RSF from operating in Sudan's western borderland – an economic and militarily important area for the RSF. In the long-run, however, SAF wants Chad to take a more militarily active role in combating the RSF and supporting proxies, especially from the Zaghawa and Masalit communities inside Sudan, to fight the RSF. Chad is only likely to pursue this if it feels that Hemedti and the RSF are gaining the upper hand in such a way that it puts Chad's internal security at risk.

Central African Republic (CAR)

The CAR government has significant internal and external security concerns that directly threaten the national government of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. Since coming to power in 2017, Touadéra has sought external security partners, settling on the Russian Wagner Group in 2017, and Hemedti and the RSF by 2021. Both Wagner and RSF have helped Bangui resist internal threats emanating from rebel groups. Due to Wagner and the RSF's attempts to weaken N'Djamena, Chad worked with SAF in 2022-23 to raise a force from Darfur to fight against Wagner, RSF, and Bangui. This conflict was escalating in early 2023 prior to the SAF-RSF conflict breaking out, with these geopolitical competitions remaining unresolved.

Since growing closer to Bangui in 2022, the RSF's presence in eastern CAR has grown, including involvement in gold mining and establishing operations bases. During the current SAF-RSF conflict, the latter benefits from having a rear base in CAR and has sought to use the area to resupply militarily, though the scale of this is unclear. As the conflict continues, the RSF's presence in CAR will likely increase in value, especially if they are forced from Khartoum and need to wage a more insurgent-style fight with SAF.

Libya

Ongoing fragility in Libya, coupled with a porous border and the long-term engagement of various Sudanese armed actors in the country's conflict could potentially fuel the war in Sudan.

7 Jérôme Tubiana and Marielle Debos, 'Déby's Chad: Political Manipulation at Home, Military Intervention Abroad, Challenging Times Ahead', United States Institute of Peace, Peaceworks No. 136, 2017: 21.

In fact, the strongest accusations of external engagement in the conflict to date, including by the UN Under-Secretary General for Sudan, are reports of General Haftar's National Libyan Army (LNA) providing armaments, intelligence and fuel to the RSF, potentially with a link through the Russian Wagner Group.[8] Although the LNA denies this, and on 10 May SAF claimed that the LNA had stopped providing any support to the RSF.

Since at least 2015, several Darfur rebel groups, including Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) signatories, and Musa Hilal's forces, have been paid to fight and protect oil installations in southern Libya alongside the LNA.[9] Although a combination of the 2020 Libyan Ceasefire Agreement and the JPA have resulted in the return to Darfur from Libya of Sudanese armed groups, some are reported to retain forces in Libya, including Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minnawi (SLA-MM) and Musa Hilal. The RSF has also had a limited presence in Libya in conjunction with the LNA. Furthermore, the Libyan border and conflict have created profitable smuggling routes, including of cars, weapons and people, in which armed actors on both side of border, including the RSF, are involved.

Finding sources of money, fuel, weapons and ammunition are crucial to the RSF's capacity to continue to prosecute the war. In Libya, beyond support from the LNA, there is also the possibility of purchasing illicit arms and ammunition, which can be smuggled back to Sudan. At the moment though the bulk of the RSF's material appears to be from either internal stocks from before the war, or taken from those captured from SAF. It is not clear yet if likely limited and opportunistic support from the non-state actors in Libya will have a significant impact on the long-term trajectory of the conflict.

Egypt

Cairo has significant interests in Sudan and prefers Khartoum to be politically and economically weak and dependent upon Egypt, making it easier to pursue its own interests. Furthermore, Cairo sees the SAF as being integral to its interests in Sudan. Thus, more than any of Sudan's neighbours, Egypt has the clearest shared interests and deepest relationship to one of the belligerents. While in the long-term Egypt is likely to benefit most from a Sudan where SAF are the dominant force, the conflict is also a serious security concern.

Egypt's main strategic concerns are related to the Nile and Sudan's regional relationships with Ethiopia and the Gulf underpinned by more short-term security and economic interests. Fundamental to Egypt's interests in Sudan are its use of the Nile waters – 90 per cent of Egypt's water supply – including the downstream impact of Sudan's Merowe Dam and especially

8 'UN warns of deteriorating humanitarian situation in Sudan', DW, 5 May, 2023, https://www.dw.com/en/un-warns-of-deteriorating-humanitarian-situation-in-sudan/a-65526193.

9 Early in the Libyan conflict the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) supported the opposite side, but switched sides to the LNA in 2018. Musa Hilal is one of the original Janjaweed leaders, but fell out with the NCP regime and formed the Sudanese Awakening Revolutionary Council in February 2014, and sent forces after this to fight alongside the LNA. As Hilal grew more and more anti-Khartoum in the ensuing years the government sent the RSF to capture Hilal in November 2017. Released in 2021 he stayed close to Burhan and reportedly nursed a grudge towards Hemedti for his capture. In 2022 SAF used Hilal to help raise a militia force in Darfur to fight against the RSF, especially inside CAR.

Khartoum's position on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which Cairo views as an existential threat. Egypt's interests in Sudan are therefore strongly affected by Sudan's relationship to other foreign actors, in particular Ethiopia. After the NCP's removal and the SAF's political ascension, Sudanese support for Egypt's position on the GERD increased. Prior to the outbreak of the SAF-RSF conflict, Egypt was supporting a competing political initiative to bring to power its preferred political allies in Sudan, which were operating under the FFC-Democratic Block.

The SAF-RSF conflict weakens Egypt's influence in Sudan and thus puts its interests at risk. It also makes it more difficult to resume negotiations with Ethiopia over GERD technical issues. Furthermore, it creates challenges to Egypt's economic interests, especially importing raw commodities (such as agricultural products and gold) and access to Sudan as a market for Egyptian exports. The presence of Egyptian pilots and servicemen as SAF's military base in Merowe, who were captured by RSF early in the conflict and then repatriated, reflects both the ties between SAF and Egypt and RSF fears of Egyptian involvement. However, beyond providing pilots to SAF's air force, there is no evidence yet of Egypt's engagement or military support to SAF. But if SAF were forced to vacate Khartoum, or it appears that they are no longer in a position to dictate Sudan's political future, Egypt may be forced to intervene to protect its interests.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia's interests in Sudan are focused on the GERD and cross-border security fears, especially along their contested eastern border. As with its other neighbours, Sudan's relationship to Ethiopia under the NCP moved initially from antagonism and support for each other's rebels, especially before the CPA, to a more collaborative and pragmatic relationship, resulting in better relations with Ethiopia from 2014. Following the NCP regime's removal, however, the relationship between the two countries deteriorated with Sudan's increasing opposition to the GERD and SAF's ties to Egypt. In early 2020 skirmishes broke out between SAF and the Ethiopian army in the contested area of Fashaga along the Gedaref border with Ethiopia. Then in late 2020 with the outbreak of war in Tigray, tensions increased further between Sudan and Ethiopia with the latter accusing SAF of supporting the TPLF and other opposition groups with weapons, supplies, and safe-haven inside Sudan.[10]

Following the November 2022 peace deal between the TPLF and Addis, tensions appeared to ease between Khartoum and Addis as open hostilities have largely ceased. Despite this, the TPLF maintain a presence in Gedaref, which could only happen with SAF's approval, and the relationship between SAF and Addis is marked by mistrust on both sides. Tensions with SAF contrast with a number of informal visits by Hemedti (and one official visit in January 2022) to Addis and the close relations he and Prime Minister Abiy share with the UAE. While the RSF may offer a counter to a Sudan dominated by SAF with close ties to Egypt, ongoing internal

10 See 'Resistance in the Peripheries: Civil war and fragile peace in Sudan and Ethiopia's borderlands', Rift Valley Institute, March 2023, https://riftvalley.net/publication/resistance-peripheries-civil-war-and-fragile-peace-sudan-ethiopias-borderlands.

political tensions in Ethiopia likely increase the risk of Addis coming out strongly in support of one side or the other. At present, the SAF-RSF conflict is not occurring near Ethiopia and does not involve cross-border communities, and thus does not pose an immediate threat to Ethiopia's internal security. If the situation stays this way, Addis is unlikely to take actions that would risk worsening the conflict.

Eritrea

Like Ethiopia, Eritrea would be concerned by an escalation of violence in Sudan near its borders, but to date eastern Sudan has been largely unaffected by the violence. Eritrea also has had a complex relationship to Sudan, again with a mixture of transborder ethnic groups and both legal and illicit cross-border activities connecting the two countries. In the past, Sudan and Eritrea have supported rebel groups from communities that straddle the border, with Asmara supporting the Beja Congress and Khartoum supporting Beni Amer opposition fighters in Eritrea. More recently Asmara was deeply upset about SAF support to the TPLF and their lack of support for Prime Minister Abiy. At the moment, however, Asmara's traditional allies in eastern Sudan support SAF. Since at least 2020 Nazir Tirik of the Beja Hadendawa has seen the SAF, and the FFC-CC as an ally that can help meet his objectives. Thus, his support to the SAF prior to the October 2021 coup, and his new role in the miliary aligned political bloc opposed to the new transition to civilian rule under the December 2022 Framework Agreement, may have limited Asmara's ability to undermine SAF's influence in eastern Sudan as it will be harder for Asmara now to incentivize the Beja to act against SAF.[11] Furthermore, eastern Sudan seems increasingly under SAF control with most influential political and community actors and communities, including some from the Beni Amer, having come out in support of SAF.

Asmara's frustrations with SAF, especially its continued toleration for TPLF presence in eastern Sudan, does not necessarily translate to support for Hemedti and the RSF. Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki is wary of Hemedti and appears to believe that SAF can provide the kind of stability in eastern Sudan that Asmara would benefit from. Furthermore, support for Hemedti could empower the UAE in eastern Sudan and from Asmara's perspective this would weaken the Horn's independence and make it more subservient to Gulf machinations. In the short-term, Asmara is likely to work to increase its own influence among eastern Sudan's communities, encourage SAF to disconnect from the TPLF, and support a negotiated agreement to the end of the conflict that preserves SAF's political power.

Impact of Refugees

In addition to the impact of the conflict on the relationships between countries in the region at the national level, the arrival of refugees in neighbouring countries will likely have significant impacts on social and economic dynamics in border areas. At present, refugees are moving mostly to Egypt, South Sudan, and Chad. As regional countries are largely staying out of the

11 For more on the dynamics of eastern Sudan, especially related to the JPA, see: 'What Next for Sudan's Peace Process? Evolving political and security dynamics in the East', Rift Valley Institute, March 2022, https://riftvalley.net/publication/what-next-sudans-peace-process-political-and-security-dynamics-east.

conflict, the arrival of refugees is for now one of the most significant regional repercussion of the conflict. For instance, their arrival in Chad and South Sudan in large numbers will put a strain on areas with scarce resources. This has already resulted in local food price increases, especially as border areas in South Sudan, Chad and CAR depend heavily on trade from Sudan.[12] The additional pressures created by the refugees – in South Sudan's case mainly returnees – could also have a negative impact on local community relationships in areas with a history of conflict.[13] The most pressing regional impact is therefore likely to have mainly local consequences, although in the case of Chad this could have national reverberations.

CONCLUSION

The US-Saudi mediated 7-day ceasefire, which was renewed on 29 May, coincided with a brief reduction in violence. Since 30 May, however, fighting intensified and SAF announced on 31 May that it was suspending its participation in the Jeddah talks, with the US Government and Saudi Arabia suspending the talks on 1 June. Violence has continued in Khartoum, as well as Darfur and North Kordofan. In particular it escalated in Darfur's major towns, bringing about the collapse of locally supported arrangements to mitigate the conflict.

The current conflict dynamics suggest that there will not be a quick resolution to the violence and make the outcome hard to predict. A continuation of the conflict will exacerbate the already dire humanitarian crisis, resulting in greater displacement of civilians both internally and across Sudan's borders. The increasing violence in Darfur and its growing ethnic dimensions, including efforts by both parties to mobilize support from communities along ethnic lines, also increases the risk of violence spreading into Chad. The risk of other Sudanese non-state armed actors becoming involved in the conflict, alongside a growing security vacuum and criminality, also augment the likelihood of an escalation and spread of the violence.

For now, however, there are significant disincentives for regional actors to support one party at the expense of the other. In fact, many regional actors appear unwilling to become involved in the conflict but instead are pushing political means through which they can influence the course and outcome of the war, for example through mediation via IGAD or the involvement by the AU in the US-Saudi led talks.[14] Nevertheless, if the conflict and its spill-over become more acute, or either party starts to gain the upper hand, this could incentivise external engagement, which in turn could precipitate other states to become involved. Given the wider state of flux across the region, both domestically and in the relationships and balance of power among states, the war in Sudan could still have unpredictable and wide-ranging regional consequences.

12 Despite having the highest number of refugees, the impact in Egypt may be less acute because many are from Khartoum's more affluent households and often have better socioeconomic networks and opportunities in Egypt.

13 Arrivals in Upper Nile are primarily Shilluk and Nuer displaced to Sudan by fighting since 2013/14 from areas still contested, such as Pigi and Baliet, making their return both difficult and highly sensitive.

14 On the AU's initiative see: https://au.int/en/newsevents/20230531/third-meeting-expanded-mechanism-sudan-crisis-discuss-implementation-african.

CREDITS

This research paper is a product of the FCDO's Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) programme, funded by UK aid from the UK government. XCEPT brings together leading experts to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the factors that shape violent and peaceful behaviour. The programme carries out research to better understand the causes and impacts of conflict in border areas and their international dimensions. It supports more effective policymaking and development programming and builds the skills of local partners. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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