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Can the SAF Defeat the RSF in Sudan?

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General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) via Daily Sabah

Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) are nimble, capable, and self-financing. These three factors combined with the fact that corruption and cronyism have hollowed out their primary rival, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), mean that the SAF and its allies are unlikely to defeat the RSF. Barring meaningful negotiations, Sudan faces a protracted war that will fragment the already brittle nation.

The fighting between the RSF and SAF, which began on April 15, 2023, has now spread well beyond the country's capital of Khartoum ([Sudan Tribune](#), April 15). Fighting between RSF and SAF units and their allies has occurred—or is ongoing—in all of Sudan's eighteen states. The RSF had been planning to take on the SAF for months ahead of the outbreak of hostilities. Units from the RSF were pre-positioned in key areas in and around Khartoum, as well as in areas near critical airfields which were later attacked by the RSF ([Africa News](#), April 18). The RSF has no air assets and, so far at least, Sudan's Air Force has remained loyal to the SAF.

Conflict between the RSF, led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), and the SAF, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, was, in many respects, inevitable. The SAF and the RSF are locked in a battle for supremacy over one another. The SAF has insisted on the integration of the RSF into the SAF within two years. It has also insisted that Hemedti answer to Burhan as commander of the armed forces.

The RSF and Hemedti, however, have demanded that such an integration take place over a decade. This effectively means no integration ([Middle East Eye](#), April 17). Hemedti knows that integration of the RSF with the SAF will curtail his power, disrupt his patronage network, and ultimately block him from becoming the leader of Sudan, which is his ultimate goal.

The fact that both sides view the war as a zero-sum game, combined with the RSF's entrenchment in urban areas, points to a protracted war that will further destabilize an already unstable region ([Sudan Tribune](#), May 11).

The Rise of the RSF

The RSF is rooted in the conflict in Darfur in western Sudan. Disputes over land and land use between those who identify as Arabs and speak Arabic and those who belong to non-Arab tribes has driven the ongoing conflict. [1] In 2003, members of some non-Arab tribes fomented a rebellion in the long-marginalized Darfur. The government of Sudan's long-time and now-deposed ruler, Omar al-Bashir, responded to the rebellion by funding and equipping the primarily Arab Janjaweed militias. The Janjaweed allowed the Bashir government to fight the rebellion on the cheap with an ill-disciplined but effective militia (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), April 28). It was this militia that later came to be the RSF.

The current leader of the RSF, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, better known as "Hemedti," joined the Janjaweed at the start of the rebellion. Hemedti is a member of the Awlad Mansour sub-section of the Mahariya clan of the Rezieghat tribe, whose traditional territory includes parts of neighboring Chad as well as northern Darfur. Before joining the Janjaweed, Hemedti was a well-connected small-time trader in everything from livestock to electronics ([Al Jazeera](#), April 16). Hemedti's superiors and their overseers from Sudan's security service noticed Hemedti's ability to lead men and, even more critically, navigate clan politics and singled him out for rapid promotion.

In 2013, the RSF was created as a way of formalizing the Janjaweed. Hemedti was awarded the rank of lieutenant general and assumed command of the RSF. As a paramilitary force, the RSF fell under the purview of the National Security and Intelligence Service (NSIS) rather than the SAF. However, in reality, the NSIS exercised little control over the RSF. By 2015, the RSF, and specifically Hemedti, only answered to the Office of the Presidency and Bashir himself. Bashir, against the advice of many in his inner circle, viewed the ever-capable Hemedti and the RSF as something of a praetorian guard that he could also use to check rivals within the SAF.

The Bashir government used the RSF as shock troops that could be, as their name implies, rapidly deployed to put down rebellions and counter insurgent groups like the Sudanese People's Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N) ([Nuba Reports](#), November 3, 2014). While the RSF was becoming better equipped, trained, and more experienced, Hemedti, returning to his roots as a trader and merchant, was busy building a financial empire that could sustain not only him and his family but also a web-like patronage network that would rival that of President Bashir. The discovery of large deposits of easily mined gold in RSF-controlled parts of Darfur gave Hemedti and the RSF even more leverage ([The Africa Report](#), January 13, 2021).

Beside profits from the mining and export of gold, Hemedti and the RSF benefited from the deployment of RSF forces to Yemen where they supported the war waged by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia against Yemen's Houthi rebels. The UAE and Saudi Arabia paid at least three billion U.S. dollars for the deployment of units from the RSF and the SAF to Yemen. Hemedti and SAF-linked elites pocketed much of the money ([African Arguments](#), August 1, 2019).

A Formidable Foe

Ahead of the RSF-SAF conflict in April and in the days following the first major battles between the RSF and the SAF, the RSF positioned its forces in dense urban environments, notably in Khartoum and its sister cities. While the SAF, estimated at 120,000 men, outnumbers the RSF, estimated at 70,000 men, the RSF's decentralized force structure, equipment, and experience give it an advantage over the SAF in urban environments. The RSF, which attacked multiple SAF-controlled airfields, also knows that it and its supply lines are vulnerable to the SAF-controlled air force ([Sudan Tribune](#), April 16). Consequently, the RSF has dispersed its forces into densely-populated, hard-to-target urban areas. The urban areas also allow the RSF to loot the supplies it requires rather than rely on supply lines that cross Sudan's open terrain ([Al Jazeera](#), May 7).

In comparison, the SAF, with its ponderous bureaucracy and heavy weaponry, is poorly adapted to urban warfare and counter-insurgency. After all, the Bashir government created the RSF and other militias as its counter-insurgent forces. The RSF, which likely has access to anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and shoulder-fired SA-7s, can exact a heavy toll on the SAF's armored vehicles and attack helicopters. [3] The RSF enjoys support from Libya's General Khalifa Haftar, the UAE, and Russia's Wagner Group ([Al Jazeera](#), April 17; [The New Arab](#), May 1). Given Sudan's porous borders, many of which the RSF controls, it is unlikely that the RSF will suffer from a lack of weapons and materiel.

The RSF and its leader Hemedti are also self-financing. Hemedti and his forces control some of Sudan's most productive gold fields, which generate hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue ([All Africa](#), September 11, 2022). Hemedti and the elites around him have invested in multiple sectors of the Sudanese economy and can rely on numerous income streams that are unlikely to face serious disruption despite the war. The money also allows the RSF to pay higher salaries than the SAF.

Outlook

General Sir Frederick Haldimand, a Swiss mercenary serving under General Thomas Gage in the years before the American Revolution, warned the British about dismissing the colonial militias when he said "the Americans would be less dangerous if they had a regular army." [4] The British learned to not underestimate irregular forces. The RSF bears no political resemblance to colonial-era militias but the same martial principles are active. The RSF, like most well-developed militias, can and will leverage its nimbleness, decentralized leadership, and its ability to adapt and evolve to outfight the conventionally organized SAF. This is not to say that the RSF will defeat the SAF. A clear winner in the war is unlikely. However, the RSF can, if it chooses to, ensure a protracted war in Sudan, which will be profoundly destabilizing for not only Sudan but for the region.

Notes:

[1] Intermarriage between those who identify as "Arab" and non-Arab, economic ties, and clan and inter-clan rivalries all mean that the conflict in Darfur defies easy ethnocentric explanations.

[2] Troop strength estimates for both the SAF and RSF vary widely. In both cases, it is unlikely that even senior leaders know exactly how many soldiers are in the ranks. In the case of the SAF, troop strength estimates often do not take into account allied militias which could add another 15,000 to 30,000 men to the SAF total troop strength.

[3] The SAF has already lost a considerable number of its aircraft. However, most of these losses likely occurred as a result of attacks on airfields.

[4] See: John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflection on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (University of Michigan Press, 1990).