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Photo: Members of the Border Guards Forces (BGF) who are loyal to Musa Hilal meet in Mustareiha in North Darfur on August 12, 2017 and pledge to resist disarmament and integration into the rival Rapid Support Forces. Revolutionary Awakening Council photo.

Ominous Threats Descending On Darfur

By Dr. Suliman Baldo
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Overview: Weapons Collection Campaign With “Shoot to Kill” Orders

On October 11, 2017, a large contingent of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Sudan’s largest paramilitary corps, redeployed to North Darfur’s capital, al-Fashir, from neighboring South and North Kordofan states. According to local media and eyewitness reports, the reinforcements consisted of some 10,000 fighters who arrived on 400 vehicles consisting of “technicals” (mini-trucks mounted with light to medium artillery pieces), armored vehicles, and water and fuel tankers. In his welcoming speech, the governor of North Darfur state, Abdel Wahid Yousif Ibrahim, indicated that the contingent was brought over to help local security forces implement the second and compulsory phase of a weapons collection campaign that the government launched in August 2017.¹

What began in part as a disarmament and collection campaign has rapidly escalated into a volatile, high-stakes armed standoff that could dramatically alter the balance of power of a resource-rich region where large-scale violence has unfolded. In the days that have since followed the initial RSF deployments, according to numerous reports, RSF fighters and Sudanese government troops both increased their force size and activities significantly in the area. They have brought heavy military equipment and hundreds more vehicles, seized weapons and motorcycles, and engaged in bold personal attacks on individuals. Most notably these RSF fighters have recently entered the large and highly productive gold-mining area of Jebel Amer, which has been tightly controlled for several years by Musa Hilal, the leader of a rival armed group to the RSF and an outspoken recent critic of the Sudanese government.² There are also multiple reports of heavy government and RSF forces moving to other areas near Jebel Amer, including another key stronghold area of Hilal’s: Saraf Omra. These recent events suggest dynamics among groups in North Darfur that had stabilized and remained relatively peaceful for a time may be quickly coming to a boil. But the situation is highly fluid, with a rapid surge in efforts by the region’s vitally important traditional authorities and mechanisms to defuse the situation as well.

1 The Enough Project • Policy brief • enoughproject.org
Ominous Threats Descending on Darfur



Arrival of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in the capital of North Darfur, El Fasher. October 2017. Photo: Radio Dabanga

The Sudanese regime's political and security incentives, prompting years of selective recruitment and weaponization of rival groups to serve its interests, have created and exacerbated the current situation. Beginning with the lead-up to the 2015 elections, President Omar al-Bashir announced his intent to rein in the tribes. He was motivated to do so because of rising levels of alarm within his inner circle of power at the growing political and military influence of the tribes at the expense of the ruling National Congress Party in the five Darfur states and three Kordofan states.³ This led al-Bashir to issue Presidential Decree Number 419/2017,⁴ establishing a High Commission for the Collection of Weapons in the States of Darfur and Kordofan, with immediate effect.⁵ The extensive territorial coverage of the commission's mandate for all eight states reflects the extent of the harm that the regime has done by arming so many groups in these parts of Sudan. The most prominent tribal militias in the eight states were armed and equipped by the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) itself, in conjunction with parallel and coordinated arming of other groups by the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS).⁶

Presidential Decree 419 of 2017 required citizens to hand over any illegal weapons, ammunition, and unlicensed vehicles to the security forces or face legal action under Sudan's criminal justice laws, including but not limited to the Public Safety Act, and the Arms and Ammunition Act of 1986.⁷ Chaired by Sudanese Second Vice President Hassabo Abdelrahman, the commission for weapons collection includes representation of all relevant ministries at the ministerial level. Presidential Decree Number 452 of June 11, 2017 further added to the commission the top commanders from SAF, the NISS, the national police, and the Rapid Support Forces.⁸ The commission was given powers to employ all means necessary, including detentions and the use of force, to disarm those they encountered.⁹ "All means necessary," was interpreted to allow "shoot to kill" tactics with opponents of Decree 419.¹⁰

The first phase of the campaign has seen the collection of only a limited number (in the lower thousands) of the estimated hundreds of thousands of firearms known to be widely possessed by civilians, militias of all kinds, and paramilitaries operating under the nominal control of the government of Sudan in the eight states of Darfur and Kordofan. Reflecting the limited response to the campaign, the voluntary surrender

of firearms yielded 2,000 pieces in South Darfur and 3,000 pieces in West Darfur as the deadline of the period for voluntary surrender set for mid-October 2017 approached.¹¹

Successive governments in Sudan have armed civilians and militias recruited on an ethnic basis to wage war against armed insurgencies. Arming these fighters is considered a cheap option, both in monetary terms and for reducing human losses among privileged elite classes. The regime of President Omar al-Bashir, however, carried the practice to unprecedented levels. It did so because of its drive for political survival and security that went beyond the narrow military expediency that prevailed in the no less ill-advised and supremacist calculations of the military establishment that was in place under President Jaafar Nimeiri (who held power between 1969 and 1985) and Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi (who held power between 1986 and 1989).

The result is that now entire areas in Sudan that are affected by rural insurgencies are awash with firearms that are held by government-sponsored militias, paramilitaries consisting of militias integrated in the armed forces, members and former fighters of armed insurgent groups, and ordinary citizens.

The government of Sudan scored a major political and diplomatic success with the lifting of U.S. trade and financial sanctions that had been imposed on account of Sudan harboring international terrorist groups in the 1990s and perpetuating atrocity crimes against its own citizens in conflict areas. On the heels of this diplomatic success, the weapons collection campaign appears to be meant to present the regime of President Omar al-Bashir to the international community as a guarantor of domestic and regional stability. The effort appears to have worked, with the U.S. chargé d'affaires in Khartoum reportedly welcoming the disarmament campaign after a briefing by the official overseeing its implementation, Vice President Abdelrahman.¹² The welcome would appear premature because of the selective and heavy-handed approach the campaign has adopted from the beginning that risks backfiring.

A successful disarmament and weapons collection campaign in Sudan would require the Sudanese government to develop a comprehensive strategy to address root causes of conflict that pushed individuals and groups to arm themselves in order to protect their families and communities. The militarization of the citizenry in Darfur and parts of Kordofan and eastern Sudan has been a process that developed over decades in a context of multiple armed insurgencies and as a result of short-sighted government strategies for waging counterinsurgency through proxy tribal militias. The systematic arming of tribal militias by the government without strict systems for the control and tracing of arms further aggravated the situation in many places where weapons could be purchased from arms traffickers, and an underground weapons market thrived. The collapse of law and order institutions and the disintegration of rule of law under the watch of the current regime also deepened the sense of insecurity and provided added incentives for people to arm themselves. Local intercommunal disputes over dwindling land and water and over newly discovered mineral resources also encouraged tribes to build up their military capabilities with the full complicity of government security agencies that prioritized their counterinsurgency interests.

Sudan desperately needs a good disarmament campaign. However, the manner in which the current campaign is unfolding bodes ill for its outcome. It is entirely driven by narrow, short-term security considerations, and it fails to address the factors that led to the spread of weapons outlined above. As a result, the campaign received a lukewarm response from the public and no collective militia response to our knowledge. On the contrary, the disarmament campaign triggered major tribal tensions in Darfur and

sparked an ominous armed standoff between the two largest paramilitaries in the country, the Rapid Support Forces and Border Guard Forces.

To lay the foundation for a more effective and broadly beneficial disarmament campaign in Sudan, the Sudanese regime should prioritize a comprehensive and inclusive peace with the Darfur armed groups that rejected earlier limited solutions and with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-North (SPLM/A-N) that fights the regime in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states. The Sudanese regime should disarm the tribal militias and paramilitary groups that are armed by its own security agencies to curb the violence that occurs in intercommunal clashes in which these militias engage on the sides of their tribes.

A comprehensive and lasting solution to conflict in Darfur requires addressing the rights of the 2.5 million direct victims of ethnic purges.

If the government were to disarm the militias and paramilitary groups that it had armed to begin with, other tribes might be convinced to follow suit. The disarmament of the tribes would require a phased process involving the kinds of trust-building measures that are familiar to disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) experts. Involving a party such as the United Nations and African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) as a facilitator and guarantor of the campaign would be crucial to encourage the progressive disarmament of Darfur's many tribes. The Sudanese government must also implement the legal and institutional reforms it has endorsed in a number of peace agreements, including but not limited to the 2005

Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement, and the 2011 Doha Document for Peace in Darfur. Opting for a policy of "shoot to kill" tactics targeting those who are reluctant to surrender their arms in Darfur, as instructed by the vice president, is a recipe for disaster that could plunge Darfur into a new phase of bloodshed.

A comprehensive and lasting solution to conflict in Darfur requires addressing the rights of the 2.5 million direct victims of ethnic purges and pursuing justice and reparations for what they have suffered through no fault of their own. Their right of return to areas from which they were driven during the successive ethnically targeted attacks over the last decade and a half should be respected and facilitated as appropriate. Perpetrators of the worst atrocity crimes and those who instructed them to commit such crimes should be held accountable. Only with such forthcoming admissions of the wrongs committed in Darfur and remedies for those affected will the Sudanese regime be able to bring back social peace and lasting stability in Darfur.

Arming The Tribes: A Double-Edged Sword

A recent virulent verbal spat, between warlord and tribal leader Musa Hilal and Second Vice President Hassabo Abdelrahman, shortly after the announcement of the launch of the government-led disarmament campaign in mid-August 2017, served as an ominous sign of the troubles to come. The verbal clash threatened to escalate into large-scale fratricidal bloodshed, pitting the Border Guard Forces—which are under nominal government command (but have always remained loyal to their founding commander Musa Hilal)—against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), commanded by Hilal's younger cousin and one-time protégé Mohamed Hamadan Dagolo, known as Hemmeti. However, there are many signs that precisely because of this blood relation, the worst violence has been averted for the moment, though well-founded fears persist that large-scale violence could erupt.

Paradoxically, the two main feuding paramilitary groups both have their roots in the Janjaweed militia that the Sudanese government created to support the counterinsurgency campaign led by the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), against a rebellion in Darfur that began in the early 2000s. In the government's counterinsurgency campaign in Darfur, the SAF soldiers and Janjaweed fighters jointly perpetrated a campaign of large-scale killings, rapes, and the torchings of villages in 2003 and 2004 that displaced more than 2.5 million non-Arab Darfuris from their lands into sprawling camps where they remain today, nearly 15 years later. The Sudanese government recruited the Janjaweed fighting force primarily from the clans of the North Darfur-based camel-herding Rizeigat tribesmen of Arab descent. These fighters were sent on a killing rampage that targeted the non-Arab Fur and Massalit farming communities and the non-Arab pastoralist Zaghawa people. People of these three non-Arab groups in Darfur were subjected to an ethnic cleansing campaign. The clans that carried out these acts were also influenced by an obscure "Arab Gathering" (also translated as Arab Alliance, and Arab Confederation) group. This group was launched in 1987 by a few dozen Darfuri elites of Arab heritage who publicly propagated an Arab supremacist ideology for the first time in 1987. The group has since that time continued to seek greater political and military power for their communities and the deliberate marginalization of non-Arab groups.¹³

When a first wave of violence subsided in 2004, the Sudanese government yielded to intense international pressure and absorbed most of the Janjaweed into a newly created "Border Intelligence Force," which was later renamed the Border Guard Force (BGF). Following an early 2013 fallout between the government and BGF commander Musa Hilal, the Sudanese regime created the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) that year and assigned Hemmeti as its commander. Hemmeti and the RSF first served under the operational command of the NISS and later under SAF. The new RSF force initially consisted almost entirely of fighters from the Mahariya clan of the Rizeigat group that is the rival to Musa Hilal's Mahameed clan. The newer RSF then broadened its recruitment base as it rose to prominence in the government's security structures. In May 2017, President al-Bashir stated that the creation of the RSF was his greatest achievement and an immense source of pride for him as he presided over a ceremony inducting a total of 11,428 new fighters into the RSF.¹⁴

President al-Bashir's regime increasingly relied on the RSF, leading to the mushrooming over time of the RSF's roles and functions. On top of its original counterinsurgency purpose that it continues to assume in western and southern regions of Sudan, the RSF was also deployed to ruthlessly repress peaceful expressions of dissent in urban areas. This was the case in September 2013, in Khartoum, when more than 170 protesters, many students and children among them, were killed.¹⁵ In 2014, the RSF was deployed as Sudan's primary border force, as part of Sudan's effort to demonstrate to the European Union that it could help to contain irregular flows of migrants from and through Sudan to Europe.¹⁶ Starting in 2015, RSF forces deployed alongside SAF soldiers in the war in Yemen under the Saudi-led alliance against the Houthi rebels.

In response to the latest tensions in Darfur, the Sudanese government is deploying the RSF to "pacify" people in a Darfur tribal and social landscape that has been torn apart by the Sudan government's own divide-and-rule policies. Such policies involve selectively rewarding certain tribes in Darfur for their loyalty to the regime by allocating to them the modern local government units that loosely overlap with traditional historic dars (the Darfuri name designating tribal homelands). The Sudanese government has armed certain tribes in its desperation to contain the Darfur armed movements. Major tribes have therefore acquired territorial and military power, while exercising the state's administrative and fiscal powers. The end result of these practices is that Darfur today resembles a *de facto* militarized, ethnic-

based system of local government. The larger tribes allied with the government have acquired a sense of tribal sovereignty. As a result, “border” disputes became major drivers of intercommunal violence as compellingly documented in a 2008 publication by a prominent Darfuri scholar, Yousif Takana.¹⁷

The centuries-old traditions that regulate social relations and support the peaceful coexistence among major tribes and minority tribes living on their “dars” have kept the peace among Darfur’s many communities for generations. Occasional disputes over resources and land used to be contained and regulated through traditional conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms that are akin in many ways to today’s concepts and practices of transitional justice. Tribal peace conferences in Darfur include phases of fact-finding by traditional elder mediators from neutral tribes, acknowledgement of responsibility in triggering a clash, and compensation based on the Islamic Sharia legal system of blood money for lives lost, injuries sustained, and property looted or destroyed.

The current Sudanese government has, however, manipulated these mechanisms for political and security purposes and profoundly disrupted the effectiveness of these systems. Instead of maintaining the tradition of government neutrality in tribal disputes, and instead of participating as an observer and guarantor of agreements reached in tribal peace conferences as successive post-independence governments have done, the current regime has instead armed some tribes against others. SAF’s paramilitaries, such as the Border Guard Forces, the Central Reserve Police, and the Rapid Support Forces have joined in tribal disputes in which their own groups were involved, using government-issued arms and munitions in these conflicts with total impunity as they are granted immunity by the national laws.

The RSF As An Enforcer: A Fatal Flaw of Civilian Disarmament Campaign

Critics have been quick to point out the limitations of a purely security- and politically-driven approach to disarming the tribes and civilians in Darfur—absent a comprehensive and inclusive peace process in Darfur and Sudan, and without the support and participation of those targeted for disarmament.¹⁸ While the effort to curb the spread of small- and medium-range weapons in the population is long overdue, there is little chance this campaign will succeed without a broader social peace taking hold in Darfur and Kordofan. A sustainable policy would require the government of Sudan to maintain a neutral posture among the tribes and to reverse the deep harm it has inflicted on millions of Sudanese people in the states where the government itself has been the lead distributor of weapons to civilians since the 1980s.

In the wake of a July 2016 decision by the Sudanese Defense Ministry to integrate all paramilitaries under the command of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), the RSF’s subsequent inclusion in the committee tasked with overseeing the implementation of the weapons collection policy raised grave concerns in Darfur. In particular, the inclusion of the RSF corps within the security forces ordered to enforce the weapons collection campaign, by force if necessary, was bound to fuel the distrust of those targeted for disarmament, whether they were organized tribal militias or individuals who acquired arms to defend their families, farms, and herds in the absence of law and order in their regions. A main motivation for arms acquisition in Darfur remains self-defense in response to the collapse of law and

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order in the region and the targeting of entire communities by government militias acting with total impunity, including the RSF which are chief among the aggressors.

Many tribal leaders and ordinary citizens have pointed out that the RSF has repeatedly attacked entire communities targeted solely on the basis of their ethnicity, killing many and forcing tens of thousands to flee their homes as amply documented in the periodic reporting of the joint United Nations and African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) reports to the U.N. Security Council as well as by reputable local and international human rights organizations.¹⁹ RSF forces have also taken the side of their tribe in many instances of tribal infighting. For these reasons and others related to the RSF's routine involvement in criminal activities, such as looting and extortion, many in Darfur have said that the RSF cannot be trusted as a neutral actor to sit at the highest level of decision-making and as the primary enforcer on the ground of the civilian disarmament policy.

Tribal Tensions: The Standoff Between the Rapid Support Forces and the Border Guard Forces

When the standoff between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by Hemmeti and the Border Guard Forces (BGF) led by Musa Hilal first began, the BGF fighters were quick to declare that they rejected their integration into the RSF. Their leader, Musa Hilal, argued that the BGF was already a "regular force" and part of the SAF, which is technically a true and fair qualification of their legal status. However, the BGF fighters were mostly motivated out of their concern that the civilian disarmament campaign was meant to dissolve their force and erode the authority of their tribal leader, Musa Hilal.

In a defiant move, on August 12 Hilal summoned BGF fighters who were loyal to him to his tribal chieftain headquarters in Mustareiha. Thousands of BGF fighters, coming from multiple SAF garrisons in Darfur, responded to his call and pledged to resist disarmament or integration into the RSF by force if required. The display of force was motivated, among other reasons, by the previous day's interception and detention by the RSF of seven of Hilal's close aides, who were returning from Libya. Vice President Hassabo suggested that the men were there on behalf of Hilal to negotiate the recruitment of some 1,000 fighters from Darfur to send to Libya's Gen. Khalifa Haftar. In return, Hassabo alleged, Haftar would have provided logistical support to Hilal.²⁰

Hilal ridiculed the claim and challenged Hassabo to try to disarm his fighters forcibly as the vice president had threatened. In multiple audio and video recordings that were widely distributed through Sudanese social media, Hilal subsequently claimed that Hassabo was a thief of humanitarian aid when he worked in the governmental Humanitarian Affairs Commission that oversees the work of humanitarian agencies in the country. Hassabo in turn said that the time for leniency was over and Hilal needed to be confronted. In response, Hilal further challenged the vice president and insulted him with language unfit for print.²¹

Musa Hilal has lobbed personal attacks at the regime of President Omar al-Bashir before, while sparing the president himself, and this strategy has served Hilal well in the past. It has served as a survival tactic as it implies that the president personally is above blame and only corrupt members of his entourage are to blame for the tensions between Hilal's political platform, the Sudanese Revolutionary Awakening Council (SRAC) and the regime. It is unclear whether that approach will remain successful, given the degrading and deeply insulting language Hilal used against the vice president. Hilal's closest aides also followed his lead with similarly inflammatory statements. Zakariya Musa Abbas, a top commander in Musa

Hilal's SRAC militia, threatened from his exile in Libya to target the families of Hassabo and Hemmeti if a suspected plot to assassinate Musa Hilal were to succeed.²²

Another serious incident occurred weeks later, when an RSF patrol clashed on September 21 with what the RSF field commander said were human traffickers belonging to the Border Guard Force operating on the porous borders among Sudan, Libya, and Egypt. Two RSF fighters and 17 alleged human traffickers were killed in the clash; those killed included Musa Hilal's personal bodyguard and relative Suliman Daoud.²³ A statement issued days later by a tribal alliance of Mahameed tribesmen in Khartoum vehemently denied that those killed had anything to do with human trafficking and claimed that those killed were traders and artisanal gold miners returning from a business trip to Libya. The statement claimed that the group was killed ruthlessly after being detained by the RSF for failing to pay a high ransom for their release.²⁴ Subsequent statements by the Sudanese Revolutionary Awakening Council spokesman Haroun Mideikhir also indicated there had been threats to target and kill Musa Hilal and his close followers and relatives. He characterized the incident as a deliberate government attempt to stoke tribal tensions within the Rizeigat tribe by seeking to push the RSF and the BGF to confront each other militarily.²⁵ (As noted above, both separate paramilitary forces were recruited on the basis of their ethnicities from different clans of the Rizeigat people.)

The killing of the 17 BGF elements affiliated with Musa Hilal came very close to sparking armed clashes between BGF and RSF fighters when some 270 BGF vehicles reportedly surrounded the RSF bases in the gold-rich Jebel Amer area and surrounding lands. These BGF forces demanded the release of BGF elements that had been detained during the September 21 incident; they also demanded the return of their vehicles and other belongings that had been confiscated by the RSF and the surrender of commanders responsible for the incident to justice authorities. A Rizeigat tribal mediation committee succeeded in getting the RSF to meet first two demands but failed for the third, according to reliable sources.²⁶

Tribal mediation appears thus to have only partially succeeded in averting an alleged government plan to push the RSF and the BGF to confront each other in order to weaken both to better control them, according to many commentators.²⁷ The recent deployment to North Darfur of an armada of technical, armored and service vehicles with some 10,000 RSF fighters brought over from neighboring North and South Kordofan states clearly demonstrates the government's determination to neutralize the restless BGF and put an end Musa Hilal's influence over the BGF fighters.

The renewed threats of a fratricidal conflict between the RSF and the BGF fighters prompted a collective of Rizeigat intellectuals to issue a statement in which they accused the regime of President Omar al-Bashir of seeking to stoke conflict within and among Arab communities—after the government's having used the same divisive and deadly tactics with other groups. Rizeigat elders and activists are evidently concerned that most of the RSF troops who were deployed to Darfur in October 2017 belong to other ethnic groups from Kordofan and central Sudan. Rizeigat intellectuals, community leaders, and activists consider the deployment a deliberate government attempt to neutralize the tribal mechanisms that have so far succeeded in averting deadly gun battles between the core elements of RSF and the BGF.²⁸ However, it is worth noting that the same tribal dignitaries, with the exception of a few individuals among them, had met the atrocity crimes committed by the Janjaweed, the BGF, and the RSF against Darfuri non-Arabs over the last decade and a half with deafening silence.

The Criminal Economies Underpinning Current Tensions

Regardless of whether these tensions lead to open armed conflict as many fear, and some wish, or prompt the parties pull back from the brink, the confrontation has already revealed several hidden layers of the economic underpinnings of the rivalry among the actors involved. Because of the covert alliances between members of the inner circles of power in Sudan's kleptocratic regime and the warlords they have created to protect their power and their ability to loot the country's rich resources, it is unlikely that the lucrative enterprises in which the politicians and the warlords are jointly involved would, in the end, help calm the current tensions.

Joint Looting of Sudan's Natural Resources

Earlier reporting by the Enough Project and others has shown that Musa Hilal and Hemmeti are both involved in exploiting the resource-rich Jebel Amer area in North Darfur.²⁹ In a 2016 report, U.N. investigators documented the income that Hilal and the Abbala armed group gain from artisanal gold mining operations at Jebel Amer, estimating at least an annual income of \$54 million.³⁰ Follow-up reporting by local media in 2017 revealed that of the two semi-industrial gold mines in Jebel Amer that are specialized in extracting additional gold from the residues of artisanal mining, one belonged to El-Genaid company, known to be owned by Hemmeti's brother.³¹ The other was owned by a Border Guards Force commander.³² Musa Hilal reportedly owns an unknown number of artisanal gold mines (locally known as "wells"), while also heading the tribal body that controls the entire large-scale operation jointly with the tribal leader of the Beni Hussein people on whose traditional tribal lands Jebel Amer is found.

As to the involvement of government officials in the gold rush for personal gain, the former governor of North Darfur, Yousif Kibir, reportedly owned four "wells." Kamal Abdel-Latif, a former minister of mining, reportedly operated eight. A financial services company owned by a former director of the Central Bank of Sudan (CBOS) was among a handful of companies that were authorized by the bank to purchase gold from artisanal miners.³³

The joint venture in exploiting Jebel Amer clearly serves the interests of both Hilal and Hemmeti, but it does not prevent frictions or flare-ups from occurring. This reportedly happened recently with the killing of an RSF captain (who had recently returned from deployment in Yemen) during a search for an RSF vehicle that had allegedly been carjacked by elements close to Hilal.³⁴ No wonder that in January 2017, when the then-minister of interior called on the army to intervene to enforce state authority and control over the Jebel Amer mining site—which he said was beyond the capacity of the national police—the two warlords publicly ridiculed him, forcing his resignation. This incident laid bare the limits of the state's authority in Darfur and shows the intimate intertwined monetary interests binding government officials and the warlords protecting them.

This trend of mutually beneficial avoidance, observed in earlier incidents of brinksmanship at Jebel Amer, appears, however, to be in its waning days, replaced by what appears to be the government's determination to curb the economic power of its rival, Hilal. On October 26, a large formation of RSF fighters descended on Jebel Amer and took control of the area after disarming the militiamen who were there.³⁵ The regime is also targeting for intimidation or elimination Hilal's closest allies, including through arrests and detentions, as the incidents discussed above would indicate.

“Blood Money” From the War in Yemen

In his response to the vice president’s threats, Hilal shot back that the RSF fighters were being used as mercenaries in the war in Yemen, while regime insiders divert lucrative Saudi payments meant for Sudan to the private pockets of a handful of officials he named. These individuals, according to Musa Hilal, include the RSF commander Gen. Hemmeti, a senior officer overseeing the operation in the SAF’s military intelligence department, a NISS senior commander, and the controversial Gen. Taha Osman, whose tenure as President Omer al-Bashir’s cabinet director has continued to be marked by financial scandals even as he was officially removed and a close relative of the president was appointed to replace him.³⁶

The financial incentives that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia offers to individual foreign fighters and to countries providing troops supporting its war in Yemen are proving to be a strong magnet for both the fighters and their countries, and indeed for the masses of unemployed youth desperate for opportunities to earn some income even if it means participating in a foreign war. According to informed sources and media reports, RSF foot soldiers receive 500,000 to 600,000 Sudanese pounds (SDG) in one lump sum payment upon their return from six-month deployments in Yemen. Junior officers receive an average of 600,000 to 750,000 SDGs for the same period (equal to \$25,000 to \$30,000 U.S. dollars at the parallel market rate of 20 SDG to 1 U.S. dollar at this writing in mid-October 2017). During their deployments, the local salaries, allowances, and benefits of the RSF continue to be paid normally. In case of death in combat, the fighter’s family would receive the payment, in addition to diya, or blood money, calculated at the Saudi Arabian rate for diya. The provider, in this case the RSF, would receive 40 percent of the total package payment of all the fighters. These financial incentives account for the noticeable rush by young men of fighting age to join the RSF regardless of origin. This would partially explain the demonstrable ability of the RSF to draw new recruits as evidenced of the induction of a total of 17,000 new fighters in its ranks in May 2017. The average monthly salary of a foot soldier for the deployment period is more than 10 times higher than the monthly salary of the highest-paid medical practitioners in the public sector.³⁷ For obvious reasons, it is highly unlikely that any of the lump sum Saudi payments compensating the RSF as a troop-contributing institution would ever find their way to Sudanese state coffers.

Official Trade in Vehicles of Tainted Origins

The arms collection campaign launched in August 2017 also involved the regularization or confiscation of thousands of vehicles that had been illegally smuggled into Sudan from conflict-torn neighboring countries, primarily Libya and the Central African Republic. The presidential decrees authorizing this campaign inadvertently exposed yet another dimension of the criminal economy of the Sudanese kleptocratic elites.

The risk is great that those smuggling vehicles into Sudan are using this activity for money laundering.

The vice president said, somewhat implausibly, that of the illegally imported 60,000 vehicles that were in circulation in Darfur and are gradually finding their way to Khartoum and other areas of the country, only a small fraction, according to his count, were reported by Interpol as being linked to some criminal background.³⁸

While any figures cited by Sudanese officials, including those at the highest levels in this instance, should be subject to further verification, there is indeed a serious problem associated with these vehicles. Despite the dismissiveness of the vice president, the risk is great

that those smuggling the vehicles into Sudan are using this activity for money laundering. It is unclear what percentage of this fleet of illegal vehicles has simply been stolen or extorted from lawful owners in Libya.

The Sudanese government's decision to legalize the status of the vehicles by making the individuals who purchased them pay government customs and tax dues (which are federal levies), and licensing fees at the local level (both varying by model and year), points to the Sudanese government's readiness to have the state profit from a trade of highly suspect origins. According to local reliable contacts, the customs dues on a 2014 Toyota Hilux mini-truck model were 160,000 SDGs (\$8,000 U.S. dollars). Customs fees on the Toyota Land Cruiser, in equally high demand, were 280,000 SDGs (\$14,000). Customs on the Hyundai Atoz model, for individuals with limited budgets, amounted to 22,000 SDGs (\$1,100). State and provincial authorities also imposed administrative and licensing fees on these vehicles that are indexed on the Sudanese customs department's fee schedules.

Smugglers of these vehicles and those financing them seized an opportunity to evade official customs and tax levies and overcome other limitations on the importation of vehicles to Sudan, including the requirement to import new models and the availability of a large market of limited-income Sudanese people. The collapse of public transport systems where they existed made it appealing for many households to acquire the cheaper secondhand but lightly used Korean models such as the Atoz and Klick for a portion of their price in the local used-car market. The higher-priced Toyota Land Cruiser and Hilux models appealed to a narrower clientele, reportedly including agents for car dealerships in Khartoum and other buyers with a lot of cash in hand who were able to move large sums of money through bank transfers to Darfur.

There is no lack of beneficiaries from the illicit trade in the vehicles smuggled into Darfur from neighboring countries. According to sources, the Meidoub militia that is part of the Central Reserve Police, an official paramilitary force, reportedly levies some 2,000 SDGs on each vehicle entering North Darfur from the El-Malha control post, on the border with Libya, which the militia controls. Vice President Hassabo told the media that the vehicles entered Sudan through a dozen other posts. It does not appear that any of the crossing points of the trucks carrying the smaller vehicles was an official customs station, indicating clear violations of articles 190 and 198 of Sudan's customs law.³⁹

The role of the trade in these vehicles in financing the civil war in Libya and in sustaining Islamist militias there before their retreat has yet to be fully investigated.

Conclusion

Darfur, Kordofan, and all of Sudan's other restive regions urgently need a good, serious campaign to disarm civilians. However, a sustainable solution for the serious problem of proliferation of small and medium arms in the hands of civilians, and the reversal of the trend of the use of such arms in an alarmingly growing number of intercommunal deadly conflicts, would require the Sudanese regime to abandon such policies as the arming of certain loyal tribes against others collectively labeled as regime opponents.

The Sudanese government should pursue a comprehensive political solution to its open-ended conflict with the Darfur armed movements and the Sudan People Liberation Movement/Army-North (SPLM/A-N); only then would the government be able to launch a credible campaign to disarm the tribes and civilians.

Such a disarmament campaign should progress through the same channels that the government has used to aggressively arm the tribes, that is to say through their chiefs and through the traditional command structures of pastoral communities. The campaign should be voluntary, based on assurances of the neutrality of the government with regard to all tribes and the citizens of the country. Disarmament should be phased, requiring all the tribes to first voluntarily put aside the heavy weapons in their possession in a process that can be verified by a neutral observer, such as UNAMID.

Societal peace is achievable in Darfur, but only if the government refrains from interfering with the rich traditions and processes of tribal reconciliation in Darfur. Protecting the rights and remedying the wrongs done to 2.5 million victims in Darfur is no less central to a comprehensive and lasting social peace in this region. Their rights of return should be respected as they seek; orchestrators and perpetrators of atrocity crimes should also face justice.

As for the current standoff between the RSF and the BGF, this current situation might not erupt into a full-blown frontal gunfight. There is a reason for this reserve. While it is in the regime's interest to encourage such a confrontation with the aim of weakening both forces to better control them, there is little appetite among the Rizeigat people, we are hearing, for this to happen. Unlike instances of attacks on civilians in Jebel Marra, an RSF offensive against the BGF fighters would likely involve blood brothers fighting on opposite sides. This is in addition to the joint power and wealth ambitions of the leadership of both the RSF and the BGF. The redeployment of 10,000 newly recruited RSF fighters from North and South Kordofan appears meant to neutralize this ethnic kinship factor between the core constituents of the RSF, who are Rizeigat Mahariya, and members of the BGF, who are predominantly Rizeigat Mahameed. The freshly deployed fighters are reportedly mostly from Kordofan and from the central Sudanese tribal groups, and hence less inclined to be swayed by tribal mediation to stand down.

In the end, the factor that would most likely discourage a head-on clash would be Khartoum's eagerness not to risk losing the good press it has been receiving from its international partners, including especially the United States and the European Union. By dramatically increasing its military footprint in Darfur, the Sudanese regime would be vulnerable if an incidental clash were to spin out of control—as could have happened following the killing of the 17 followers of Musa Hilal in September. The record of both the RSF and the BGF would indicate that such a scenario is quite likely to happen, given the tendency of the two forces to shoot first and ask questions later, if at all.

Endnotes

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