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SUDAN'S ARMED MILITIAS AND THE CRISIS OF CIVIL DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

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About the Author

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Introduction

In December 2018, Sudan experienced a popular uprising that successfully overthrew the regime of Omar al-Bashir, leading to a transitional period with power shared among military leaders. The transitional government, guided by the principles of freedom, peace, and justice that fueled the uprising, prioritized the resolution of internal conflicts and the achievement of peace. As part of these efforts, negotiations were initiated with armed militias mediated by the state of South Sudan in its capital, Juba. These negotiations culminated in the signing of the Juba Peace Agreement in 2020 between the government and the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF), which encompassed seven armed militias operating in Darfur, the southern Blue Nile, and eastern Sudan.¹

One of the most significant outcomes of the Juba Agreement was the inclusion of the SRF coalition as a third party in the transitional government. However, the integration of these militias into the political system faced challenges due to the behavior of some of their leaders. This hindered the progress of the civil democratic transition and deepened the divide between these militias and the civil political forces, with the former aligning more closely with anti-democratic elements. Eventually, these militias formed alliances within the army and orchestrated a military coup against the transitional government on 25 October 2021.

This essay examines the role of armed militias in Sudan and how they use armed conflict to achieve their leaders' stated objectives of power and wealth redistribution, as well as ending political and economic marginalization in certain regions of Sudan. These leaders employ a political discourse that links the cessation of war and the prospects of peace to a peaceful transfer of power, democratic transformation, and equitable distribution of power and resources.

The central question posed by this paper is why these armed militias have positioned themselves against the Sudanese uprising and opposed the process of civil democratic transition and instead supported the military coup. The argument put forth in this paper is that the militias' opposition to civil democratic transition stems from how they were formed, their organizational structures, the conduct of their leaders, and the intersections between public and private interests. Furthermore, the fragility of the state, its limited capacities, and the lack of legitimacy among its leaders are significant factors that underpin the militias' approach to human rights

1 Osama Abdul Rahman Abu Bakr, "Armed Militias and the Crisis of Civil Democratic Transition in Sudan", Panel Discussion, Khartoum, Sudan, December 2022.

issues and popular demands.

What is a Militia?

A militia is a semi-official or private armed organization that engages in combat in exchange for financial compensation. Unlike regular national military institutions that operate within the framework of official military doctrine, militias have historically existed as separate entities. Consequently, they operate outside the jurisdiction of general state laws, regardless of whether they are born out of political or social forces or emerge from formal partisan systems, such as those observed in South American socialist countries half a century ago. While militias may be officially recognized by the state to serve the interests of the regime, they do not adhere to regular military protocols or function within official state institutions.²

In recent times, militias have arisen due to economic and social factors related to the mismanagement of modern states and the marginalization of certain cultural and ethnic groups, particularly in areas where state authority is tenuous. Although militias often employ emotionally charged populist rhetoric – justifying armed struggle as a response to conspiracies against their group and asserting that their only means of survival is through armed resistance – the complexities of engaging in armed conflict and the resulting interests and threats frequently lead to deviations from their initial objectives. The logistical support required by militia forces often creates highly complex relationships for their leaders, determining the sustainability of the militia while turning these leaders into warlords.

The most distinguishing characteristic between militias led by warlords and those striving to protect their communities or reform the existing political system is the extent to which they engage in combat operations for profit and participate in looting and pillaging during battles or in areas under their control. Other factors may include the formation of a militia centered around a specific ethnic group, or an ethnic group's dominance of leadership and command within the militia. In such cases, the principles of human rights, the rule of law, and democracy are often abandoned in both discourse and practice.

Authoritarian regimes have historically employed specific

2 Nawal Moussa Ibrahim, "The Political and Social Characteristics of Militias in the Arab World: Janjaweed and Peshmerga as Case Studies" (Arabic), Master's thesis in Political Science, Arab Academy in Denmark, 2009, p. 19.

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mechanisms to deal with the phenomenon of militias, driven by policies aimed at prolonging the regime's survival. Since using violence against militias proves ineffective, as they tend to reemerge despite being weakened by the conflict, regimes resort to employing political corruption. They call for negotiations to end the violence, implementing a policy known as "divvying the spoils". This approach involves utilizing "political money" within the "political marketplace", drawing from concepts of business management as theorized by Alex de Waal. Consequently, militia leaders are transformed into "political businessmen".

As political businesspeople, militia leaders expand into new sectors, such as obtaining counter-terrorism contracts, which are highly sought after at present. Through such endeavors, they attempt to restructure their operations and improve their reputations. As the sources of revenue for militias increase and diversify, the level of institutionalization of the militia-as-a-company also expands, along with its contractual relationships with clients and suppliers.

However, it is crucial to avoid treating militias as a homogeneous group that adheres to the same set of principles. Certain movements exhibit stronger militia behaviors than others, with the tendency toward militias weakening in response to changing circumstances.

The Constantly Evolving State of Armed Militias in Sudan

The map of armed militias in Sudan is complex and constantly evolving, with numerous factions operating throughout the country. The exact number of militias is difficult to determine as they often undergo divisions due to disputes over political and economic spoils, as well as internal power struggles. Additionally, there are major militia formations that command multiple smaller militias.

It is important to note that the armed militias in Sudan are diverse, with different motivations and dynamics. The landscape is fluid, with new groups emerging and existing ones undergoing changes.³ Below are the most important armed militias currently operating on Sudanese soil.

³ Abdul Qadir Al-Badawi, "Sudanese Rapid Support Forces: From Militias to Regular Force (2003-2018)" (Arabic), Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Strategic Analysis Series, No. 6, August 2021.

The Janjaweed

One significant armed militia in Sudan is the Janjaweed. They originated as a response by the Bashir regime to armed groups from the Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit tribes in Darfur. The Janjaweed sought to mobilize and organize tribes with an Arab culture under the pretext of protecting their wealth and security from rival factions. The Bashir regime exploited the Janjaweed to incite conflicts among different segments of society in Darfur; it also provided training, weapons, and cover for the crimes committed by the Janjaweed against civilians.

In 2007, a faction of the Janjaweed, led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (also known as Hemedti), defected due to a lack of financial support from the Bashir regime. A dispute also arose between Hemedti and the tribal leader Musa Hilal, who was the militia commander. In response, the Bashir regime replaced Hilal with Hemedti, promising retroactive financial support, arming their forces, and granting military ranks to Hemedti's fighters.

In 2013, the Janjaweed underwent restructuring and reconstituted by the Sudanese National Intelligence and Security Service, under the leadership of Hemedti. This occurred after the then Sudanese chief of staff refused to transfer the Janjaweed's affiliation from the security apparatus to the armed forces, only to be considered a separate regular force reporting directly to President al-Bashir. As a result, a new regular force, Rapid Support Forces (RSF), emerged from within the Janjaweed. The RSF expanded its activities beyond Darfur and operates throughout various parts of Sudan.⁴

Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM)

The SLM was initially established by individuals from the Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit communities, similar to the Janjaweed. Originally known as the Darfur Liberation Front, its membership was primarily composed of members from the Fur tribe. However, once it began to welcome individuals from other tribes in the region, the movement adopted its current name on 14 March 2003.

On 28 October 2005, the SLM convened a conference in the town of Haskanita in South Darfur. During this event, Secretary-General Minni Arkou Minnawi, a prominent figure within the movement, challenged the leadership of Abdul

⁴ Associated Press, "Sudan's Bashir Begins Tour of Darfur", *The Washington Post*, 22 July 2007, available at <https://wapo.st/35kaToR>

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Wahid al-Nur and opposed his presidency.⁵ As a result, the movement was split, with one faction led by Minnawi. Further splintering subsequently occurred, leading to the formation of additional factions. This included the leaders of North Darfur, led by Jar al-Nabi Abdel-Qader, and another new faction, which also went by the name Sudan Liberation Movement (or the Group of 19), which later split to give rise to the United Sudan Liberation Movement led by Ahmed Abdel Shafi.

One of the armed factions operating in the Darfur region is the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), led by Khamis Abu Bakr from the Masalit tribe. Abu Bakr, who previously served as the deputy to SLM leader Abdul Wahid al-Nur, defected from the SLM and established the SLA. He had been a notable political figure within the SLM and was among those who formed the Group of 19. As part of this group, they suspended the powers of al-Nur and later removed him from leadership.

Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)

The JEM experienced its own fracturing in March 2004, resulting in the formation of the National Movement for Reform and Development. This splinter group was led by Colonel Jibril Abdel Karim Bari and Khalil Abdullah. In another set of divisions, Muhammad Salih Harba defected from the JEM and established the JEM Field Command, while Abd al-Rahim Abu Risha formed the JEM Peace Wing. Furthermore, Dr. Idris Azraq's group also separated from the JEM, forming another independent faction.⁶

TABLE 1: The most prominent armed militias in Sudan

	Militia Name	Composition ⁷	Year	Region of activity
1	Janjaweed / RSF	Tribal	2003	Darfur
2	Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM-North), led by Abdulaziz al-Hilu	Ethnic	2011	South Kordofan
3	SPLM-North, led by Malik Agar	Ethnic	2013	Blue Nile
4	SLA, led by Abdul Wahid Nur	Tribal	2003	Darfur
5	SLM, the Transitional Council, led by al-Hadi Idris	Tribal	2005	Darfur
6	The Liberation Forces, led by Taher Hajar	Tribal	2010	Darfur
7	JEM, led by Jibril Ibrahim	Tribal	2003	Darfur
8	SLA, led by Minni Arko Minnawi	Tribal	2005	Darfur
9	Tamazuj Movement, led by Muhammad Ali Qureshi	Ethnic	2011	Darfur – Kordofan
10	Corrective Beja Conference, led by Zainab Kabbashi	Tribal	-	Eastern Sudan
11	Beja Opposition Conference, led by Osama Said	Tribal	-	Eastern Sudan
12	United Popular Front for Liberation and Justice, led by al-Amin Daoud	Tribal	-	Eastern Sudan
13	Beja Conference, the leadership office, led by Abu Muhammad Abu Amna	Tribal	-	Eastern Sudan
14	Beja Leadership Conference, led by Abdullah Musa	Tribal	-	Eastern Sudan
15	Beja Armed Struggle Conference, led by Faki Ali Ohaj.	Tribal	-	Eastern Sudan
16	People's Movement North / Revolutionary Forces	National	2022	Eastern Sudan

⁵ Interview with Dr Sharif Harir by Issa Dafallah, Al-Mawakeb Newspaper, 9 October 2005. <https://www.facebook.com/almawakib>

⁶ Al Jazeera, "Armed Factions in Darfur" (Arabic), 27 October 2007, available at <https://t.ly/Got6>

⁷ Note on composition: A tribe is a social group that is geographically localized and shares a belief in a common ancestry. Solidarity and advocacy within the tribe are often based on shared bloodlines. On the other hand, an ethnic group is a broader concept that encompasses a social group with common characteristics united by a specific region. Within an ethnic group, there may be variations in language, customs, and traditions, but there is a sense of common destiny that holds the group together.

Understanding the Transition Crisis in Sudan: A Political Marketplace Approach

The concept of the “political marketplace” offers an explanation for the tendency of armed militia leaders in Sudan to engage with illegitimate and undemocratic regimes. In this context, both the authoritarian regime and militia leaders adopt a business-like approach to managing their relationships, considering factors such as political financing, control over the use of force, mechanisms for handling political conflicts, and opportunities for integration into the global political economy. These variables shape their interactions and decision-making processes within the political landscape.

Political Financing

Political budget refers to the funds available to a politician for discretionary use, often aimed at securing the loyalty or co-operation of other politicians. It may include bribes from arms contractors and payments to commanders, which are sometimes disguised as payments to “ghost soldiers.”⁸ Such budgets can be influenced by external parties seeking to shape the political process to serve their interests. In this context, it is worth noting the involvement of regional blocs or axes in Sudan's transitional period, particularly with regard to the RSF. One notable regional player is the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has demonstrated its influential presence in the Juba peace negotiations mediated by South Sudan between the Sudanese government and the SRF aimed at ending the civil war in Darfur and the southern Blue Nile regions. Lt. Gen. Tut Qalwak, the head of the South Sudanese mediation team, acknowledged the UAE's support, stating, “The UAE's role extended even within the negotiating rooms. They have been with us since the beginning of the talks between the government and the SRF coalition, leading to the signing of the peace agreement.”⁹

The UAE's influence in Sudan extended beyond the negotiation table to include the Sudanese parties involved

8 Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War, and the Business of Power*, Polity, 2015 (de Waal, *The Real Politics*).

9 Al Ain News Network, “Mediation Reveals Massive UAE Role in Peace Process” (Arabic), 3 October 2022, available at <https://al-ain.com/article/mediation-reveals-uae-in-peace-in-sudan>.

in the peace talks. By exerting pressure on the militias within the RSF, the UAE successfully removed the leader of an eastern Sudanese faction, al-Amin Daoud, and replaced him with a representative of another faction from the region, Khaled Idriss Shawish.¹⁰

This Emirati influence is driven by political and economic motives, as demonstrated by the UAE's proposal to resolve the Sudan-Ethiopia border dispute over the fertile lands of al-Fashaga. The proposed solution involved dividing the region, with 40% allocated to the UAE, 40% to Sudan, and the remaining 20% to Ethiopian farmers. Additionally, the coup government entered into a vague agreement with the Dubai Ports Company to establish the Abu Imamah Port without a proper tender or bidding process. The project – located on the Red Sea approximately 200km north of Port Sudan – encompasses an economic zone, an airport, a commercial zone, and an agricultural area. Furthermore, a 450km road will connect the port to the agricultural region of Abu Hamad in the River Nile state in northern Sudan.¹¹

The argument for the presence of political money in the aftermath of the Juba Peace Agreement is made even stronger if we consider the political and financial relationships between the Darfur movements and the UAE in the Libyan context. A UN report highlighted the presence of numerous Sudanese mercenaries in Libya serving under the Libyan National Army led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar.¹² These mercenaries are affiliated with various movements, some of which signed the Juba Peace Agreement in October 2020. According to the report, five main movements, including the Sudan Liberation Army - Minni Minnawi's wing, the Sudan Liberation Forces Alliance, the Sudan Liberation Army - Transitional Council, the Sudan Liberation Army - Abdul Wahid al-Nur's wing, and the Sudanese Awakening Revolutionary Council, received financial payments and logistical support. Sources within these movements confirmed that the funds and support were discussed and agreed upon in meetings between their military leaders and UAE representatives in Libya. According to experts, payments and logistical support were provided by the UAE and facilitated through the Libyan National Army, which also received a share of the funds.

When confronted with allegations of providing financial or military support to Darfur forces in Sudan and Libya, the UAE

10 Press Release by Minna Arko Minnawi, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8XBNn6BeVg>

11 “Ports of Sudan: External Interest with Approval of the Coup Forces” (Arabic), Madameek News, available at <https://www.madameek.com/?p=110316>

12 Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan, 13 January 2021, available at <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/>

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claimed to have a moderate stance and to be fighting against extremism and hate speech. However, these assertions raise questions about the presence of political money in these contexts. The positions of armed militias in the Sudanese political crisis before and after the 25 October 2021 coup further support the hypothesis of political money. Lt. Gen. Muhammad Bashir Suleiman, the Deputy Chief of Staff and former official spokesman for the Sudanese Armed Forces, stated that the Juba Peace Agreement did not support the goals of the December revolution and that some armed movements had sided with the military against the Sudanese people.¹³ This coordination, coupled with political money, strengthened opponents of the democratic transition and resulted in their support for the military coup, in contrast to other segments of the Sudanese people. Political money was thus used to empower armed militias, securing their loyalty, and utilizing their political presence to undermine the democratic transition process.

According to other reports, an additional deal occurred between the armed militias and the military that went beyond the official Juba Peace Agreement.¹⁴ In this deal, Minnawi acted as a negotiator on behalf of the militias. It included provisions for the militias to support the military by not undermining security companies, preventing the transfer of the presidency of the Sovereignty Council to civilians, and avoiding the extradition of wanted individuals to the International Criminal Court. In return, the militias received financial gains and a significant share of power and wealth.¹⁵

It is notable that only the power-sharing aspect of the Juba Peace Agreement was implemented. The leaders of the militia movements assumed control over key ministries – including the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, the Ministry of Energy, and the Ministry of Mineral Resources – ultimately controlling ministries responsible for 95% of government revenue. They also took charge of the Ministries of the Federal Government, Welfare, and Social Security. However, other aspects of the agreement were neglected, while all the terms of the additional deal were fully implemented.

Despite this, some armed factions publicly opposed the 25 October coup. Movements such as those led by al-Hadi Idris and al-Taher Abu Bakr Hajar explicitly rejected the coup and declared their lack of involvement in the preceding mobilization process. Similarly, a division occurred within

the SPLM led by Malik Agar, with its wing also expressing opposition to the coup.

Controlling the Means of Violence

The control over the organization of violence in Sudan exhibits a range of dynamics, from centralized control within government institutions to decentralized distribution across various societal entities. Government institutions – such as the army, national security, police, and presidential guard – may hold centralized control, while decentralized control is evident through the presence of militias, rebels, vigilantes, and criminal gangs. This fragmentation of security institutions is often employed by national “political CEOs” to prolong their regimes.¹⁶

Examining the distribution of forces that control the means of violence in Sudan over the past decade reveals a highly decentralized landscape. Armed militias have tightened their grip on vast territories, aligning themselves with the ruling regime. Rebel militias, on the other hand, have established control over significant areas. Criminal gangs operate in regions where government forces have a limited presence, engaging in activities like contraband and smuggling. Even within government institutions, the forces remain divided and engaged in competition. This division prevents any single force from challenging the ruling regime, effectively protecting it from any possible coups.

In terms of competence, the armed forces face competition from the RSF, the Operations Command of the National Intelligence and Security Service, and the Popular Defense Forces, which is an ideological institution similar to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Popular security forces also compete with other security apparatuses. The National Congress regime had established parallel state institutions that wielded considerable influence and economic power.¹⁷ This division provided an opportunity for the emergence of militias, as the contradictions between these competing government agencies could be exploited. These parallel agencies operated under the influence of individuals and power centers, lacking oversight from state institutions, making their modus operandi similar in many aspects to that of militias.

Following the fall of the al-Bashir regime, the Forces of

13 “What Are the Dynamics of the Military and Armed Movements in Sudan?” (Arabic), [Independent Arabia](#), 11 October 2022 (Independent Arabia, “Dynamics of the Military”).

14 Independent Arabia, “Dynamics of the Military”.

15 Independent Arabia, “Dynamics of the Military”.

16 de Waal, *The Real Politics*.

17 Abdul Majid Abu Majda, “Control Over Means of Violence” (December 2022); Abu Bakr, “Armed Militias”.

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Freedom and Change called for an inclusive conference. However, armed militias rejected this proposal and instead opted to negotiate with the transitional government, citing the delicate issues pertaining to war-affected areas. By leveraging the distribution of power among entities that monopolize violence, these militias maintained control over their armed groups while gaining legal legitimacy in the areas under their control. This allowed them to engage in acts of looting under the authority of the state, including the looting of UN food-supply stores, international agencies, and the UN headquarters of the mission responsible for security in Darfur regions.¹⁸ Consequently, the security networks of these militias were further strengthened, transforming them from participants in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration into joint forces for the protection of civilians. Rather than being integrated into the army, police, and security forces through a demobilization process, the militias were recognized as government forces, operating alongside token units of official government forces. This consolidation of security control by militias extended over cities they could not have entered via armed conflict alone.

The control over the means of violence in Sudan intersects with identity politics, particularly through the lens of military tribalism. This form of tribalism manifests in the creation of armed groups based on nepotism and kinship. When members or leaders in these groups revolt, members of other tribes, including merchants, officials from different ethnic groups, and neighboring communities, become the primary targets. This often results in the conflict taking on an ethnic character, further reinforcing ethnic bonds/divisions.¹⁹ In Sudan, armed militias predominantly adopt tribal structures, with each armed movement primarily aligning itself with a specific tribe and attracting weaker tribes to strengthen these alliances.

The tribal patronage that underpins the core structure of armed militias has hindered the adoption of solutions that would grant official institutions a monopoly over the use of violence. This was evident in the Juba peace negotiations when the issue of security arrangements was raised. The negotiations led to the acknowledgment of the militias, prolonging their existence and prosperity, instead of other arrangements that would have led to the militias' dissolution and subsequent economic losses for their leaders. This approach emulated the model of the RSF and aimed to consistently distribute control over the means of violence

across society, relying on the system of "joint forces". This model aligns with the interests of military regimes that prefer to work with tribal forces characterized by loyalty-based fanaticism.

However, the tribal structure of these militias and armed movements contradicts their political discourse and their professed visions for political rule and governance. The tribal system is incompatible with the principles of citizenship and democracy, highlighting that these militias do not prioritize the application of democratic systems to manage political conflicts. Consequently, militias have deliberately targeted national-level political activities and expressed concerns about the opening up of the public sphere following the signing of the Juba Peace Agreement. They mobilized their members to attack seminars and political events organized by civil forces after the revolution, such as the attacks on the Forces of Freedom and Change in El Fasher in September 2019, the Umma Party in Nyala in 2020, the Sudanese Congress in Nyala in 2022, and the Umma Party in El Geneina, West Darfur.²⁰ Their actions aimed to preserve and strengthen their influence at the regional level out of fear that it would otherwise diminish and erode.

Mechanisms for Regulating Political Disputes

The mechanisms for dispute regulation encompass the rules, standards, and processes employed in negotiating and resolving political conflicts. The formality or informality of these institutions varies depending on the extent of their organization. Societies also differ in the strictness of their regulations, whether based on legal frameworks or social norms. In Sudan, armed militias tend to rely on customary systems to settle disputes with other parties, given their tribal composition and the relatively weak organizational structure within their institutions. This preference for customary law is not present in democratic regimes governed by well-established legal frameworks and regulations. Militias gravitate towards authoritarian regimes that lack legitimacy, as they do not adhere to rigid laws but instead rely on customary practices that maintain order through ongoing renegotiation of power dynamics and the rules of engagement.

An illustrative example of the utilization of customary law in conflict resolution is the dispute between the leader of the coup and the leader of the Janjaweed-RSF regarding the reintegration of remnants from the toppled Bashir regime

18 UN, "Secretary-General Condemns Looting of Former UNAMID Headquarters in El Fasher and Expresses Concern for Safety of Mission Personnel Who Remain" (Arabic), UN News, available at <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2021/12/1090482>

19 de Waal, *The Real Politics*.

20 Hasan Issac, Analysis, Al-Rakoba Net, available at <https://www.alrakoba.net>.

into the state apparatus. In this case, mediators from the civil administration played a key role in facilitating dialogue and resolving the dispute between the two parties.²¹

Integration into the Global Political Economy

The global integration of the political market extends beyond formal globalization institutions and includes the flow of political rent. The relationship between foreign investment – particularly in the mineral sector – and businesses engaged in profit transfer and circulation of public funds in political budgets serves as a primary mechanism for the functioning of the political market for armed militia leaders. Western security co-operation also acts as another mechanism. The instability, corruption, and chronic violence associated with rentier political markets generate threats to the West, such as terrorism, organized crime, and irregular immigration. In response, Western security policies involve providing financial assistance to governments to combat these threats. However, such aid and financing often enter rentier political budgets, further exacerbating the conditions that give rise to these threats.²²

Integration into the global political economy plays a significant role in pushing armed militias to align themselves with authoritarian regimes and move away from democratic transitions. The case of Sudan exemplifies this phenomenon. For instance, the Janjaweed-RSF model created substantial economic gains through the control of gold-rich areas like Jebel Amer in Darfur, expelling Sudanese police forces, and forming partnerships with international networks involved in mining and smuggling such as the Russian Wagner company. Other Sudanese militias have adopted a similar approach, engaging in mining and smuggling activities to control mineral-rich areas. This behavior may explain the resurgence of fighting and attacks on villages in Darfur after the signing of the Juba Peace Agreement, as militias seek to displace local populations to facilitate gold mining. Similar motives related to integration into the international political economy can be observed in mercenary wars. Authoritarian regimes may allow the building of new interests based on corruption

21 Tarek El Jazouli, "Efforts to Heal the Rift Between Al-Burhan and Hemedti: Local Administration Mediates to Settle the Differences Between Al-Burhan and Hemedti" (Arabic), Sudanile, available at <https://sudanile.com/>

22 de Waal, *The Real Politics*.

without legal frameworks. Notably, the UAE-led bloc enlisted mercenary fighters from RSF militias to participate in the conflict in Yemen, providing cash incentives.²³ In Libya, Darfurian militias were deployed to support the forces of Major General Khalifa Haftar, as outlined in a UN report.²⁴

Furthermore, international funding aimed at combating illegal immigration, human trafficking, and drug smuggling has contributed to the proliferation of armed militias and their preference for operating under corrupt and dictatorial regimes. The RSF received funding from the EU as part of efforts to combat illegal immigration, reinforcing the growth of this phenomenon while benefiting from human smugglers. Intimidating messages were sent to the EU about the risk of immigration and terrorism, aimed at ensuring continued funding.²⁵ Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, the commander of the RSF, stated that they exclusively co-operate with Italy in counterterrorism and immigration efforts. Hemedti visited Italy in February 2022 to meet with international stakeholders to request technical aid and strategic support equipment, including drones, for border control and halting illegal immigration to Europe.²⁶

According to a UN report on foreign fighters in Libya, Darfurian armed groups not only serve as mercenaries for various Libyan factions but are also involved in protecting and facilitating human traffickers, kidnapping migrants for ransom, and engaging in weapons, drugs, and car smuggling. The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, based in Geneva, accused the UAE of contracting with these "Sudanese mercenaries" fighting alongside Haftar's forces in Libya and reported "horrific human rights violations" committed by them.²⁷

The concept of advanced political marketing represents a modern form of governance that is neither an ancient relic nor a transitional system on the path to being replaced by a state. Instead, it is a flexible and dynamic system that has emerged in response to recent historical developments, particularly

23 New Arab, "Sudan Withdraws Ten Thousand Fighters from Yemen" (Arabic), 30 October 2019, available at <https://t.ly/PuRCi>.

24 Al-Fateh Juma Tabar, "Integration into the Global Political Economy" (Arabic), October 2022; Osama Abdul-Rahman Abu Bakr, "Armed Militias".

25 "Hemedti Demands Legitimacy and Money to Stop Immigration to Europe" (Arabic), 3ayin Website, available at https://t.ly/4rg_.

26 Monte Carro News, Facebook Page, link: <https://www.facebook.com/monticarro/>

27 Final report of the Panel of Experts <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/>.

economic and political globalization, and the monetization of public goods and services, particularly security. The preservation of the substantial economic interests of armed militias is closely tied to their support for regimes lacking legitimacy while resisting any transition to a democratic system governed by institutional rule and the application of the law. Such a transition would jeopardize these interests, making them vulnerable to extinction.

Interests and Privileges of Militia Elites

Following their alliance with the military during the transitional period, militia leaders in Sudan were able to gain significant political privileges when they carried out a military coup against the transitional government. These leaders were granted political positions that provided them with extensive financial benefits within the Ministry of Finance, allowing them to issue customs exemptions that favored members of the militia. They even utilized Khartoum airport for the transportation of drugs and official correspondence, bypassing customary channels. Additionally, they exerted control over strategic revenue sources such as the Ministry of Minerals, the Ministry of Animal Resources and Fisheries, and the Taxation Authority, effectively transforming the militias into financial empires.²⁸

On the other hand, the Sudanese people, along with displaced communities and refugees, bore the heavy cost of the coup. The coup forces severed all humanitarian aid and development plans that Sudan had established with international partners such as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the International Monetary Fund, the African Development Bank, the EU, and the USA. This had a detrimental impact on the well-being of the people and stakeholders, exacerbating suffering and misery, particularly in conflict-ridden areas.

The military leaders who orchestrated the coup in alliance with the militias were driven by their political ambitions to seize power through military force. They sought to establish a social base for their new ruling project, as well as to revive a modified version of the previous Muslim Brotherhood regime. Their alliance also aimed to secure economic gains through mercenary operations in Yemen and engage in mining and smuggling activities with Russia, which benefited from

controlling Sudan's gold reserves.²⁹ Furthermore, they sought to maintain the political influence of the military in governing the country.

Drivers for Conflict Between Army Commanders and the RSF

A violent armed conflict erupted between Sudanese Armed Forces commander Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and RSF commander Hemedti, who were former partners in the military coup against the transitional government led by Abdalla Hamdok on 15 April 2021. This devastating conflict resulted in the loss of over 850 civilian lives, forced 250,000 people to seek refuge, and displaced one million individuals internally. The conflict left behind a humanitarian catastrophe as both parties violated international humanitarian law by occupying and bombing hospitals.³⁰ Additionally, humanitarian aid operations were looted, and all attempts to establish ceasefires for the delivery of much-needed relief were unsuccessful. The consequences of this conflict have had a profound impact on the affected population, exacerbating their suffering and worsening the overall humanitarian situation.

The armed conflict between the army and the RSF cannot be analyzed, or its causes understood, without a political marketplace approach. After a government takeover through a military coup they carried out against the transitional government of Abdalla Hamdok on 25 October 2021, the two leaders of the coup had a relationship that was largely shaped by political financing, leadership struggles, and failure to reach political agreements.

28 Bakri al-Sayegh, "Armed Group Imports Drugs to Improve Training Performance of Its Fighters" (Arabic), Al-Rokaba, available at <https://t.ly/YE35>

29 Nima Elbagir et al, "Russia is Plundering Gold in Sudan to Boost Putin's War Effort in Ukraine", CNN, 29 July 2022, available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/29/africa/sudan-russia-gold-investigation-cmd-intl/index.html>

30 Sahar Akbarzai, "Nearly 1.4 Million People Displaced in Sudan Since Civil War Erupted, UN Report Says", CNN, 28 May 2023, available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/28/africa/sudan-displaced-people-gender-violence-intl-hnk/index.html>

Political Financing as the Catalyst for Conflict

Political financing has played a significant role in shaping the relationship between Hemedti and al-Burhan. The RSF is actively seeking to expand its financial empire by gaining greater control over Sudan's gold resources. This objective has strengthened Hemedti's ties with the UAE, which is involved in both smuggling and direct purchase of gold. The UAE purchased Sudan's entire gold production for the first half of 2022.³¹ The substantial revenues generated from this partnership have allowed Hemedti to rebuild and reorganize his militias. Furthermore, the RSF has entered into collaborations with the Russian security service company Wagner, providing them access to gold smuggling operations in exchange for training, arms, and the establishment of a network. This partnership was solidified during Hemedti's visit to Russia in February 2022, where he held talks with the Russian foreign minister and expressed support for Russia in its conflict with Ukraine.³²

On the other hand, al-Burhan, the commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces, has been seeking political financing to support his ambitions of assuming control over Sudan's governance. However, he has faced increasing resistance from the Sudanese public and significant international pressure to withdraw from the political process. Al-Burhan has acquired political funds by exerting control over nearly 82% of Sudan's public revenues through commercial companies affiliated with the army.³³ These companies operate without disclosing their profits or undergoing audits by the state's general auditors. Additionally, they do not contribute any funds to the public treasury, and the details of their expenditures remain undisclosed. Al-Burhan has utilized these funds to cultivate a supportive social base, aiming to build a political alliance consisting of civil forces, civil groups, and activists who were previously exploited during the reign of al-Bashir's regime.

31 "Emirates Buys Sudan's Entire Gold Production for Six Months" (Arabic), UAE71, 10 November 2022, available at <https://uae71.com/posts/101975>

32 Aya Sayyed, "Between Hemedti and Wagner, Does Russia Stand Behind the Conflict in Sudan?" (Arabic), Roayah News, 16 April 2023, available at https://t.ly/w_Mj

33 Amani al-Tawil, "The US Role in the Future of Sudan" (Arabic), Independent Arabia, 26 December 2020, available at <https://t.ly/WpGEV>

Struggle for RSF Leadership

Al-Burhan sought to redefine his relationship with Hemedti, aiming to bring him under control by offering incentives. These incentives included granting Hemedti one-third ownership of the defense industries, appointing him as his deputy in the Sovereignty Council, and providing his militias with weapons and the headquarters of the General Intelligence Operations Command. Al-Burhan's reliance on the RSF to achieve his objectives is evident in his decision to abolish Article 5 of the Rapid Support Forces Act.³⁴ This enabled the RSF to recruit without oversight, effectively making it independent from the army and allowing it to report directly to al-Burhan as the Commander-in-Chief of the army and head of state.

When the political process required al-Burhan to step down from his role as head of state, he created a new position called the Commander of the Armed Forces and appointed himself to this position, hoping that the RSF will report directly to him. Meanwhile, Hemedti, who has begun to see himself as an equal military commander, emphasized the RSF's allegiance to the head of state only as long as a civilian figure occupies that position. This was done to ensure his freedom from the constraints imposed by al-Burhan.

Failure to Manage Political Differences

Hemedti and al-Burhan adopted opposing stances during the political dialogue sessions with civil forces, which aimed to end the military coup initiated by the two leaders and resume the transitional process. Regarding the integration of military forces, al-Burhan sought to weaken Hemedti by proposing a two-year timeline for the integration of the RSF into the regular army. In contrast, Hemedti attempted to prolong the process by demanding a ten-year window.³⁵

The deadlock between the two men pushed them to explore alternative means of resolving their differences. As a result, armed clashes erupted between their respective forces in the capital and other cities across the country, aiming to alter the balance of power. This violent conflict serves as a catalyst for change, intending to establish a new equilibrium between the

34 Sudan Tribune, "Sudanese Parliament Passes RSF Act Integrating Militiamen in the Army", 16 January 2017, available at <https://sudantribune.com/article59634/>

35 Abdul Hamid Awad, "The Sudanese Army and Rapid Support Forces: Struggle over Influence Threatens Political Settlement" (Arabic), Al-Arab A-Jadeed, 5 April 2023, available at https://t.ly/f_qvp

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two parties. The outcome of this conflict will likely shape the basis for their future negotiations and renegotiations.

Conclusion

To understand the underlying causes of Sudan's political crisis, it is crucial to study the behaviors of armed militia leaders. Warlords prefer authoritarian governments because such regimes allow them to exploit their political and economic interests by sharing power with coup regimes that lack legitimacy and popular support. This symbiotic relationship between the authoritarian regime and militia leaders, who operate as businessmen, revolves around political financing, control over the use of violence, methods of resolving political disputes, and integration into the global political economy. These shared interests facilitate co-ordination and alliances between the two parties, ultimately benefiting both while perpetuating the dire circumstances that initially led to political conflict.

On the other hand, a transition to a democratic civil system does not serve the interests of militia elites. Such a transition would address the underlying imbalances that fuel political unrest, which goes against the agenda of these elites. Participating in democratic elections does not offer significant gains for militia leaders, as they lack the popular support necessary to achieve substantial political influence. Furthermore, transitioning to a civilian political party would undermine their ability to maintain their militia status, which they prefer to retain even after settling with an illegitimate regime through armed conflict.

In conclusion, this study highlights how the interests of militia leaders and warlords in Sudan were threatened by the prospect of a civil democratic transition. The establishment of a state with functioning institutions, the rule of law, and a peaceful transfer of power posed a challenge to these leaders who had gained power and influence through armed conflict. It became evident to them that the gains they achieved through forceful means were difficult to replicate through democratic processes.

Militia leaders in Sudan capitalized on their partnership with the military to construct an alternative authoritarian agenda that served the interests of both parties, often at the expense of marginalized regions, human rights, and justice. The ongoing armed conflict between the military commander and the RSF leader is essentially a dispute over the distribution of political and economic spoils between these two individuals. Resolving this conflict requires the two parties to establish a new equilibrium that addresses their competing interests.

Therefore, this study recommends the following:

- Negotiate an appendix to the Juba Peace Agreement that addresses the imbalances contained in the document and adjusts its provisions to establish a state of institutions and a democratic system.
- The terms of reference for any negotiation and the mandate granted to the official negotiators may not exceed the state's constitution, and all settlements are to be guided by the preservation of the state institutions and the law.
- International actors in the field of combating illegal immigration or terrorism must limit their co-operation to official agencies and discourage any militia activity or their inclusion in combating terrorism and illegal immigration.
- Remove the military establishment from the political process, criminalize military coups, and end the multiplicity of armies within the state.
- Address the situation of paramilitary armed forces by demobilizing and integrating them within the official state institutions (i.e., army, security, police) according to a social and economic program, rehabilitating disarmed combatants, and integrating them into society.
- Scrutinize the choice of mediators and facilitators of the negotiation process and the hosting country and pay attention to political money when entering peace negotiation processes.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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