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The Sudanese imbroglio

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Sudan, a country strategically located on the Red Sea, has become the site of an internationalised violent internal conflict. The fighting, which started on April 15, pitting the paramilitary Rapid Response Forces (RSF) against the Sudanese Army, has drawn a host of outside actors driven by conflicting interests. What started as a vicious power struggle between army leader Abd al-Fattah al-Burhan and RSF commander and former warlord Muhammad Hamdan Daglo, also known as Hemedti, has grown into a tangled civil war with no end in sight. The complex web of internal and external interests involved has brought the spectre of a replay of the Libyan scenario: a protracted internal conflict in which neither party is strong enough to deliver a knockout blow to its adversary.

Clash of the military titans

Months of tensions, marked by mutual recriminations, came to a head on 15 April 2023. Armed clashes broke out in Khartoum between the RSF and the Sudanese Army and soon spread to other parts of the country. The main bone of contention between the warring sides revolved around the integration of the RSF into the armed forces in accordance with a Framework Agreement signed between a host of Sudanese political forces on 5 December 2022, to end the political crisis that had gripped the country following the military coup of 25 October 2021, which ousted civilian prime minister Abdallah Hamduk (al-Shobaki 2022)

At heart, this is a naked power struggle. The roots of the conflict run deep and are linked to competition over power, resources and influence between the two former military allies. Signs of the disagreement appeared soon after the dissolution of the Sovereign Council during the October 2021 power grab. Consisting of 5 civilians, 5 military officers and a civilian selected jointly by the military and civilians, the Council was formed after months of widespread popular protests prompted the RSF and sections of the military,

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in April 2019, to join forces to oust Sudan's longtime military ruler Omar Hassan al-Bashir from power. The Framework Agreement provided for the Sovereign Council to lead the country during a three-year transitional period culminating in the exit of the military from politics. Burhan took over as head of the Council, with Hemedti as his number two. But, in October 2021, Burhan and Hemedti orchestrated a putsch that halted the transition to civilian rule and established a reconstituted Sovereign Council, again with Burhan as head and Hemedti as his deputy (Ali 2023). Friction between the two allies soon crept to the surface following the introduction of an internationally backed roadmap to resume the transition to civilian rule. Contention centred around implementing provisions in the plan, primarily the timetable for merging the RSF into the armed forces, the chain of command, and removing the army from economic activities.

As the rift widened, the two sides sought to strengthen their positions by forging alliances with factions among the civilian political forces. Hemedti presented himself as a proponent of transition to civilian rule, accusing Burhan of trying to bring back remnants of the former regime. For his part, Burhan, who had repeatedly vowed to step aside for civilians, accused Hemedti of seeking to keep the RSF independent of the army and resist integration into the armed forces (Olewe 2023). Hemedti has also supported demands stressing the implementation of articles in the Framework Agreement providing for the army's disengagement from politics and speeding up the transition to civilian rule (al-'Arabi 2023).

Mediators lurch in

Internal conflicts rarely, if ever, remain pure domestic affairs (Eckstein 1965). Even when outside players do not have a hand in igniting them, civil wars are susceptible to turning into 'quagmires' drawing, if not even 'entrapping', a medley of external actors and interests (Schulhofer-Wohl 2020). Third-party support and intervention add layers of complication to internal conflicts, including civil wars, prolonging them, and increasing their human and material costs (Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce 2008; Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed 2017).

That the war in Sudan would attract outside powers should come as no surprise. Strategically located on the coast of the Red Sea, Sudan is an important node linking the Middle East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Horn of Africa regions. It is endowed with fertile soil and an abundant wealth of natural resources. While Sudan's strategic location and natural resources have whetted the appetites of regional and international powers, internal divisions and intra-Sudanese political rivalry have always provided openings for external interference. Sudan has never been a unified or stable state. Since its independence in 1956, it has been through multiple

civil wars and military coups. Two long civil wars between the north and south culminated in the division of Africa's once biggest country when South Sudan declared independence in 2011, depriving Khartoum of nearly 75% of its resources (Cockett 2016; Natsios 2012).

Several outside powers have already attempted to mediate between the Sudanese warring parties. But effective mediation relies on the trust and credibility the adversaries place in the mediators (Bercovitch and Houston 2000). Nowhere is this truer than in the failure of mediations in the current Sudanese conflict. There have been mediations galore in Sudan. But no third-party mediator has been able to harness its influence to lean on the warring parties to move towards a settlement. This, for the most part, is because none of these third parties commands sufficient trust among both Sudanese conflict parties. Mediators' interests in Sudan and in the outcome of the conflict weaken their mediations and render them divisive. Rivalry between mediators has put another dent in the mediation efforts.

A host of countries and intergovernmental organisations have joined the mediation fray in the Sudan conflict. Egypt and South Sudan opened the way and were quick to offer their good offices, but to no avail. In early May, Saudi Arabia and the United States managed to bring the warring parties for talks in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. In an apparent move to give the Saudi-U.S. mediation some teeth, U.S. President Joseph Biden, on May 4, issued an Executive Order imposing sanctions on unspecified persons 'Destabilizing Sudan and Undermining the Goal of a Democratic Transition' (The White House 2023). This was followed, on September 6, by sanctions imposed by the Treasury Department on Abdelrahim Hamdan Daglo, Hemedti's brother, for 'acts of violence and human rights abuses, including the massacre of civilians, ethnic killings, and use of sexual violence' (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2023). On the same day, the State Department imposed visa restrictions on senior RSF commander Abdul Rahman Juma for kidnapping and killing of West Darfur governor Khamis Abakar and his brother (U.S. Department of State 2023). But the Jeddah talks lacked an essential requirement of successful mediation: inclusivity. The Saudi-U.S. mediation not only left out potential international mediation partners, but also excluded the Sudanese civilian leadership. This has prompted other regional players to embark on rival mediation efforts. So far, the Saudi-U.S. process has only produced a series of momentary fragile ceasefires that have all failed to put an end to the fighting.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has launched its own mediation initiative. Spearheaded by an IGAD subcommittee headed by Kenyan President William Ruto, known as the Quartet Group, this mediation has been rebuffed by the Sudanese government which accuses Ruto of having business interests with RSF commanders (Atit 2023). For its part, Egypt with support from Chad, both non-IGAD Sudan neighbours, has launched another platform, the neighbouring countries initiative. In July,

Cairo hosted a summit which brought together the leaders of the Central African Republic, Chad, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya and South Sudan. Egypt set a very high bar for its initiative: a durable ceasefire, safe corridors for humanitarian aid delivery, and a framework for an all-inclusive national dialogue. Nonetheless, the Egyptian initiative's chances of success were very slim from the beginning, given Cairo's close ties to Burhan. Whatever grim prospects for success the Egyptian mediation had foundered on the rock of opposition from Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who insisted that any third-party mediation should be carried out in concert with African Union efforts to resolve the Sudan crisis (Yeranian 2023).

The African Union, on May 27, adopted a roadmap for the resolution of the conflict in Sudan which envisions mechanisms to coordinate support to Sudanese civilians and the promotion of an inclusive, fully representative political process in Sudan (African Union 2023). However, rivalry between key AU states and their engagement in other mediation efforts, such as IGAD's or Egypt's neighbouring countries initiative, relegates the AU's roadmap to the realm of irrelevance.

In late August-early September, Burhan embarked on a series of trips abroad that took him to Egypt, South Sudan, Qatar, and Turkey. The tour gave rise to speculations that the General was open to a diplomatic solution. Yet, hopes of a quick peaceful resolution were dashed as Burhan continued to threaten fire and brimstone and heavy fighting continued unabated.

The jumble of outside interests

In many ways, the multiplicity of rival mediations reflects the fact that Sudan has become an arena of regional and international competition. Saudi Arabia, which had been expanding its investment footprint in the Sudan, especially in the agricultural sector, supports Burhan. Sudan has also joined the Saudi-led coalition fighting the war in Yemen. In return for financial support, the former regime of Omar Hassan al-Bashir committed his country to the Saudi-led coalition and sent army and RSF troops to take part in combat operations alongside Saudi and Emirati troops. Following the 2019 uprising that ousted Bashir, Saudi Arabia and the UAE began to funnel financial and material aid which strengthened the hands of Sudan's top brass in the face of the opposition's demands for civilians to lead the transitional period (Abdelaziz 2019). The UAE, which sees Sudan as an important node in its 'string of ports' strategy, backs Hemedti, who has provided support, mainly fighters, to Khalifah Haftar's forces, the Emirates ally in Libya. In its pursuit to expand its geostrategic presence in Africa and gain access to African economies and markets, the UAE has embarked on a drive to build and control ports in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea regions. In December 2022, Sudan signed a \$6-billion deal with a consortium of UAE-based companies to

build a port and economic zone in Abu Amama on the Red Sea, 200 kilometres north of Port Sudan. The project also envisages the construction of an airport, an agricultural zone and an economic zone (Ardemagni 2023).

For its part, Egypt, which considers Sudan its strategic depth, has tilted towards supporting Burhan. A military strongman who rose to power on the back of a coup that toppled the elected government of Muhammad Mursi, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah El-Sisi is loath to the emergence of civilian rule in neighbouring Sudan, preferring instead to deal with a military regime which he can lean on to support and accommodate Egyptian interests. Cairo is keen on securing Khartoum's backing in its dispute with Ethiopia over the Renaissance Dam megaproject, which both countries believe would severely cut their shares of Nile water (Peter 2023). Egypt's declining influence in Sudan was brought into focus by Cairo's exclusion from the 'Quad for Sudan', comprised of the U.S., U.K., Saudi Arabia, and UAE, which has undertaken to oversee Sudan's transition to civilian rule. In supporting Burhan, Egypt hopes to restore its declining influence in Sudan.

Fearing a new wave of migrants fleeing the war in Sudan to seek asylum and better lives in Europe, the European Union has called for 'an immediate cessation of hostilities' (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Sudan 2023). Sudan, which has long been a source of and transit hub for refugees and migrants moving from East and West Africa, is a matter of grave concern for the EU. The RSF, which has reportedly undertaken border control functions to stem the flow of refugees and asylum seekers across the desert between Sudan, Chad and Libya, has benefitted from EU-funded training programmes in return for intercepting the migrants (Sullivan 2021).

The U.S. position towards the war in Sudan is shaped by Washington's opposition to Russian and Chinese influence in Africa. Concern in Washington has grown over the RSF's close ties with the Russian Wagner Group, which has been supplying the Sudanese paramilitary outfit with weapons and training. In February 2023, Russia and Sudan finalised the terms of an agreement that provides for building a naval base giving the Russian navy a presence in the Red Sea. Moreover, a 2017 deal struck with Sudan's former dictator Omar Hassan al-Bashir enabled Wagner to establish a partnership in gold mining operations with Hemedti and his family in Sudan (Tounsel 2023). Sudan, moreover, is an important node in China's 'Belt and Road' initiative. Over the years, China has developed significant economic interests in Sudan, with investments in a range of sectors, primarily infrastructure, transportation, and mining (Tounsel 2023).

For its part, Israel, which maintains ties with both sides of the conflict, has called for an end to the hostilities, fearing that the fighting could delay the long-awaited signing of the normalisation agreement with Sudan. Israeli foreign ministry officials have appealed to both sides to de-escalate the

conflict. Israeli leaders had hoped that the signing would take place before the transition to civilian rule. Israel's spy agency, the Mossad, has reportedly sought to strengthen its ties with the RSF in hopes that the paramilitary group would play a role in monitoring arms trafficking in the Red Sea destined for anti-Israeli actors (al-Na'ami 2023).

With this crisscrossing welter of conflicting outside interests and divergent agendas lurking in the background, internal divisions and discord in Sudan seem to have been destined to progressively get worse. It is no wonder that no mediation has been able to secure a breakthrough in ending the war in Sudan.

Back to the future: the Libyan scenario

After months of sometimes intense fighting, Sudan seems to be heading for a stalemate, where warring parties would consolidate their positions and entrench themselves in areas under their control. They are likely to continue to engage in vicious hostilities, but with little, if any, meaningful strategic advances. The odds are that negotiated ceasefires would continue to be fragile, providing nothing but very brief respites from violence.

The conflict in Sudan bears all the hallmarks of a repeat of the Libyan scenario. Since the ouster of former leader Mu'ammarr al-Qaddafi in 2011, Libya has plunged into a whirlpool of internal strife, death and destruction. The two warring parties, the UN-recognised National Accord Government based in Tripoli and the self-styled Libyan National Army of retired Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar based in Tobrouk, have established rival governing structures and state institutions, but both are also riven with internal discord, divisions and factionalism. The conflict between the two contending Libyan 'governments', along with feuding between a hodgepodge of unruly armed factions, has been fuelled by a potpourri of competing outside actors, including Turkey, Egypt, the UAE, France, Italy, and Russia, some of which have been providing warring sides with advanced weapons systems and conducted air-strikes in support of their proxies (Aslan 2020; 'Domestic divisions' 2020; Megerisi 2020).

The odds are that for quite some time Sudan, much like Libya, would remain a blood-soaked, divided state with two rival centres of power that rely on external support and brute force to compensate for their lack of popular legitimacy. A range of external actors, including neighbouring countries and global powers, have been involved in the Libyan civil war, many of which lend support to various factions, thus bringing a proxy warfare dimension to the conflict (Wehrey 2022). Similarly, the involvement of outside actors in the Sudanese civil war, and their support for the warring factions, will only further prolong and intensify the war. As the war draws on in Sudan, it could attract more external

actors, turning it into a battleground for regional and global powers pursuing their interests.

Libya's civil war was partly driven by competition for control over valuable energy resources. Sudan has its own areas that are rich in natural resources, including oil, natural gas, gold, silver, chrome, and uranium. The continued conflict in Sudan would create further incentives for the parties to engage in shadowy trade in minerals and other natural resources to boost their revenues and acquire foreign exchange which they could use to fund their war efforts, eventually perpetuating the war.

Both Libya and Sudan have diverse ethnic and tribal populations. In Libya, dormant tribal divisions were awakened and deepened with a vengeance during the conflict. As a result, tribal and regional dynamics helped shape the conflict, especially as military and political mobilisation unfolded along tribal and regional lines (Ilardo 2019). The conflict in Sudan has rekindled internal ethnic and regional conflicts that have long gone dormant. There are signs that Sudanese tribes and regions have gone back to mining their collective past, gleaning memories about perceived wrongs inflicted on them by the tribal or regional 'Other' decades ago. The renewed bouts of ethnic and tribal bloodletting in the Darfur region stand as a case in point. Brimming again with martial fervour, tribes in Darfur have returned to fighting out their old-new feuds and differences. Others which have yet to engage in actual fighting have started preparing for the worst.

To various degrees, both warring parties in Sudan represent conglomerations of interests thrown together by sordid motives. That makes them vulnerable to fragmentation that would produce new factions and offshoots that take on lives of their own and add new layers of complication to the conflict. Signs of internal divisions in the RSF have already reared their heads. For example, in a recent round of tribal fighting between the Salamat and Bani Halba tribes in Darfur, RSF fighters from the two tribes fought on the sides of their respective tribes (al-Aqra'a 2023). While the army has so far been more cohesive, historically, it has not been immune to factionalism, breakups and defections (Rogier 2005; Verhoeven 2023).

The Libyan conflict has had a destabilising impact on North Africa and the Sahel region, contributing, in part, to the spread of extremist groups and creating security challenges for neighbouring countries. Similarly, a protracted civil war, and attendant state failure, in Sudan could have spillover effects that would destabilise regional security. That is especially the case with tribal groups maintaining transnational links across Sudan's porous borders. Chad could be particularly affected, given the longstanding cross-border ethnic and tribal ties that have long been utilised in proxy warfare between Sudan and Chad. The resumption of the fighting in Darfur, which has seen clashes between non-Arab tribes siding with the army and the RSF, to which the RSF has responded with brutal attacks on non-Arab

communities, would intensify domestic pressure on Chadian President General Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno to take sides in the Sudanese conflict (Picco 2023). Likewise, Sudan's conflict could also exacerbate ongoing conflict in the Central African Republic.

As the Sudanese internal war smoulders on for months, if not even years, to come, Sudan would continue to slide deeper into internal strife and chaos, and the Sudanese people would bear the horrific costs of the war, including human rights abuses. Much like in Libya, efforts to achieve a sustainable peace agreement and political settlement in Sudan will continue to face serious challenges. International mediation efforts would continue to be protracted. Ultimately, peace in Sudan will remain as hazy and elusive as a desert mirage for far too long.

Disclosure statement

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