

Curbing Outside Intervention in the Sudan War

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Brief Analysis

Diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict are being challenged by U.S. partners and adversaries alike, including key Middle East players.

Over the past few weeks, the U.S. government has taken several prominent steps to tamp down the raging civil war in Sudan. On February 26, the State Department appointed a new special envoy, Tom Perriello, to “advance our efforts to end the hostilities [and] secure unhindered humanitarian access.” Perriello subsequently visited Uganda, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, meeting with “key partners to align efforts to bring an end to the devastating...conflict.” On March 26, he told reporters that he is working toward a resumption of peace talks in Jeddah on April 18, to be co-chaired by the United States and Saudi Arabia.

Unfortunately, these efforts to mediate the conflict are being undermined by various regional and global players. Understanding these complexities will be key to addressing one of the war's most pernicious aspects: the ongoing foreign provision of weapons and other support to both sides. In a [March 6 speech \(https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-at-the-un-security-council-stakeout-on-the-un-panel-of-experts-report-on-sudan/\)](https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-at-the-un-security-council-stakeout-on-the-un-panel-of-experts-report-on-sudan/) marking the publication of a report by the UN Panel of Experts, U.S. ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield graphically described how “the death, destruction, [and] depravity that has defined this conflict...is being fueled by arms transfers from a handful of regional powers. Armed transfers that must stop.” Similarly, the U.S. Intelligence Community's latest [Annual Threat Assessment \(https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf\)](https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf) noted: “Sudan's warring security forces may be receiving more foreign military support, which is likely to hamper progress on any future peace talks. Any increased involvement by one external actor could prompt others to quickly follow suit.”

The Two Sides

Since April 2023, the forces of Sudanese army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan have been pitted against Mohamed Hamdan “Hemedti” Dagalo and his Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The two generals were formerly allies in the transitional government formed after the 2021 coup, which came not long after another coup ousted Omar al-Bashir, the Islamist-leaning dictator who ruled the country for three decades.

The army showed some reluctance to end Bashir's rule in 2019 and retains substantial Islamist sympathies today—the product of deep Muslim Brotherhood influence in the country. The Islamist ideologue Hassan al-Turabi played an important role in both the 1989 coup that brought Bashir to power and the subsequent military government that harbored Osama bin Laden.

Hemedti is less ideologically motivated and more interested in acquiring the trappings of power. Accordingly, he has been more willing to accommodate a variety of supporters in return for a share of the spoils and military assistance.

Over the course of the war, the army has reportedly lost ground to the RSF in the western Darfur region and the south. Burhan's grip is slipping somewhat in Khartoum as well; he now leads from his headquarters in Port Sudan.

Both sides have [terrible human rights records \(https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/01/1145787\)](https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/01/1145787) and are deliberately targeting civilians in their efforts to seize territory. The RSF played a greater role in the genocide that ravaged Darfur in 2003-2005 and has resumed such atrocities of late. It has also been widely condemned for looting and massacres in other captured areas. Likewise, Burhan's air force has [repeatedly bombed \(https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230903-air-strike-in-khartoum-kills-20-civilians-activists\)](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230903-air-strike-in-khartoum-kills-20-civilians-activists) civilian areas.

Multiple Diplomatic Tracks

The East African Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has become the lead organization seeking reconciliation between the army and the RSF. The United States and Britain have separately sanctioned entities supplying arms to both sides. But Washington also supports Saudi-led negotiating efforts, with the kingdom hosting talks in Jeddah in October and December 2023.

Both Saudi Arabia and Egypt have maintained formal diplomatic support for General Burhan as the leader of the Sudanese government. This stance makes sense for them given that Burhan's forces control the Red Sea coastline.

Last August, Burhan held a flurry of meetings with foreign leaders at home and [during a trip \(https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/el-burhan-returns-to-sudan-from-unga78-meets-foreign-delegates\)](https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/el-burhan-returns-to-sudan-from-unga78-meets-foreign-delegates) to the UN General Assembly, seeking support from Egypt, South Sudan, Qatar, Eritrea, Turkey, Uganda, the Central African Republic, Comoros, and Ukraine. Three months later, Hemedti followed suit by [touring several countries \(https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/1/24/sudans-hemedti-embraced-abroad-as-he-terrorises-civilians-back-home\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/1/24/sudans-hemedti-embraced-abroad-as-he-terrorises-civilians-back-home) in an Emirati jet, with stops in South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Djibouti, Rwanda, and Ethiopia. The latter destination included a meeting with Abdalla Hamdok, the former interim prime minister in Sudan's transitional government.

What Are Iran, Russia, the UAE, and Ukraine Doing There?

Iran's rapprochement with Sudan began last July after a seven-year rift and was formalized in February when Ali al-Sadiq, the acting foreign minister in Burhan's government, traveled to Tehran. The rationale for this surprising rapprochement is not clear, but it could be a case of the Iranians exploiting an opportunity in an area where they have long had an interest, particularly after evidence emerged of Emirati support for the RSF (see below). Whatever the case, the reunion will likely have implications for Iran's stakes in the Red Sea region, where its navy has regularly deployed flotillas since 2008. Burhan's government denies that it has granted Iranian warships access to Port Sudan, but no one would be surprised if regular port calls began in the near future. (Notably, Russia [has courted \(https://apnews.com/article/politics-sudan-government-moscow-](https://apnews.com/article/politics-sudan-government-moscow-803738fba4d8f91455f0121067c118dd#:~:text=The%20agreement%20allows%20Russia%20to,Sudan%20on%20the%20Red%20Sea.)

[803738fba4d8f91455f0121067c118dd#:~:text=The%20agreement%20allows%20Russia%20to,Sudan%20on%20the%20Red%20Sea.](https://apnews.com/article/politics-sudan-government-moscow-803738fba4d8f91455f0121067c118dd#:~:text=The%20agreement%20allows%20Russia%20to,Sudan%20on%20the%20Red%20Sea.)) various officials on Port Sudan basing rights for years, including Burhan's opponent Hemedti; see below for more on Moscow's calculations.)

Thus far, Iran's military support has involved [supplying \(https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4811931-western-officials-iran-supplies-sudan%E2%80%99s-army-combat-drones\)](https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4811931-western-officials-iran-supplies-sudan%E2%80%99s-army-combat-drones) Mohajer-6 drones to Burhan's forces, with satellite imagery showing several of the craft and an associated ground control station at Wadi Seidna Air Base north of Khartoum on January 6. The Mohajer-6 has a long loitering endurance capability and a flight range of up to 500 kilometers, as well as standoff weapons that make it unlikely to be targeted effectively by local electronic countermeasures (though the RSF has [shot down \(https://www.military.africa/2024/01/rsf-shoot-down-sudans-army-mohajer-drone/\)](https://www.military.africa/2024/01/rsf-shoot-down-sudans-army-mohajer-drone/) at least one of the drones over Khartoum with a shoulder-launched missile).

For its part, the UAE has denied military engagement on the ground in Sudan, insisting that its presence in the area is purely humanitarian. In May-June 2023, however, a regional aircraft spotter network counted sixty-nine Il-76 heavy-lift cargo flights [between military airfields \(https://www.gsn-online.com/news-centre/article/major-airlift-between-abu-dhabi-and-chad-revives-speculation\)](https://www.gsn-online.com/news-centre/article/major-airlift-between-abu-dhabi-and-chad-revives-speculation) in the UAE and Amdjarass, a city in southeastern Chad adjacent to Darfur. On August 13, the UAE's Foreign Ministry [asserted \(https://wam.ae/en/details/1395303186028\)](https://wam.ae/en/details/1395303186028) that the sole purpose of these flights was to airlift an Emirati Red Crescent Society tent hospital into Amdjarass, yet satellite imagery of the hospital from multiple sources suggests that it could have been delivered in five or fewer flights. By January, the number of these flights [had swelled \(https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethnic-killings-one-sudan-city-left-up-15000-dead-un-report-2024-01-19/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethnic-killings-one-sudan-city-left-up-15000-dead-un-report-2024-01-19/) to 122. That same month, a leaked UN document found "credible" evidence that the UAE was arming the RSF, spurring [another denial \(https://www.ft.com/content/8e211c5d-0e2e-4e01-b1e6-b13852485b67\)](https://www.ft.com/content/8e211c5d-0e2e-4e01-b1e6-b13852485b67) from Abu Dhabi.

As for Moscow's involvement, Kornet AT-14 antitank missiles and other Russian weapons have [been seen in RSF hands \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/21/sudan-uae-sanctions-biden-hemeti-rsf/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/21/sudan-uae-sanctions-biden-hemeti-rsf/). The Kremlin has long used the Wagner Group as its de facto presence in Africa, providing protection to mineral extraction projects, taking a share of the profits, and fielding counterinsurgency forces in the Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, and elsewhere. Wagner and its successor organization, the Africa Corps, have been particularly visible alongside the RSF; indeed, Hemedti's force has seemingly established an [informal alliance \(https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/conflict-minerals/exposing-rsfs-secret-financial-network/\)](https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/conflict-minerals/exposing-rsfs-secret-financial-network/) with Moscow.

Wagner has also [reportedly used \(https://www.gsn-online.com/news-centre/article/uae-deal-congolese-gold-prompts-questions-and-concerns\)](https://www.gsn-online.com/news-centre/article/uae-deal-congolese-gold-prompts-questions-and-concerns) Emirati commercial networks to finance its activities in Sudan and across Africa, selling gold and diamonds on the UAE commodities market and siphoning the surplus into the global financial system via Emirati banks. The U.S. Treasury Department [has struggled \(https://www.gsn-online.com/news-centre/article/major-airlift-between-abu-dhabi-and-chad-revives-speculation\)](https://www.gsn-online.com/news-centre/article/major-airlift-between-abu-dhabi-and-chad-revives-speculation) to suppress this activity, which greatly benefits Moscow by furthering its disproportionate influence in Africa and enabling sanctioned oligarchs to access liquid funds. Russia stands to gain even more if the RSF wins the war—namely, a long-sought [naval base in Port Sudan \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/15/russia-sudan-putin-east-africa-port-red-sea-naval-base-scuttled/#:~:text=Russia%27s%20Dreams%20of%20a%20Red%20Sea%20Naval%20Base%20Are%20Scuttled—for%20Now,-U.S.%20intelligence%20believes&text=Russia%27s%20hopes%20of%20establishing%20a,Policy%20on%20condition%20of%20anonymity.\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/15/russia-sudan-putin-east-africa-port-red-sea-naval-base-scuttled/#:~:text=Russia%27s%20Dreams%20of%20a%20Red%20Sea%20Naval%20Base%20Are%20Scuttled—for%20Now,-U.S.%20intelligence%20believes&text=Russia%27s%20hopes%20of%20establishing%20a,Policy%20on%20condition%20of%20anonymity.)

. Meanwhile, cash funneled through the UAE [helps the RSF \(https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudanese-general-accuses-uae-supplying-paramilitary-rsf-2023-11-28/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudanese-general-accuses-uae-supplying-paramilitary-rsf-2023-11-28/) buy military hardware that gives it tactical advantages in the war back home.

Although it is unclear to what extent (if any) the Emirati leadership has knowingly permitted these financial activities, Abu Dhabi has several interests in backing the RSF and perhaps even tolerating the group's Wagner bedfellows. Besides the commercial benefits of tapping into the African mineral trade, any efforts to support Hemedti could help the UAE develop its networks in Africa and continue its longstanding war against Muslim Brotherhood influence. The RSF has even [supplied the UAE \(https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/20230519175910/https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a0d6be54.html\)](https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/20230519175910/https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a0d6be54.html) with manpower upon request at the height of the civil war in nearby Yemen. If Hemedti wins in Sudan, Abu Dhabi would have an indebted proxy in the Red Sea region.

In addition to these three principal foreign actors in Sudan, Ukraine has reportedly [joined the fray \(https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/02/15/evidence-mounts-that-ukrainian-forces-are-in-sudan\)](https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/02/15/evidence-mounts-that-ukrainian-forces-are-in-sudan) in recent months, seizing the opportunity to attack Russian interests. On March 6, the *Wall Street Journal* [detailed \(https://www.wsj.com/world/ukraine-is-now-fighting-russia-in-sudan-87caf1d8\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/ukraine-is-now-fighting-russia-in-sudan-87caf1d8) the extent of Kyiv's involvement, which is small-scale but has driven home the point that Moscow's forces are a target wherever they operate.

None of this external interference is helping the United States and its Western partners advance their stated goal in Sudan: a negotiated peace, or at least a negotiated cessation of hostilities. If Special Envoy Perriello and other officials hope to resolve this problem and jumpstart viable talks, they will need to pay close attention to how these actors are enflaming and benefiting from the situation:

- **The UAE:** More sanctions and higher-level public and private engagement with Emirati officials may be in order if the UAE's reported support for the RSF continues. Any additional sanctions would presumably extend beyond the Treasury Department's existing efforts targeting the UAE's permissive environment for Wagner-linked financial networks.
- **Saudi Arabia and Egypt:** Both countries should be encouraged to maintain their support for a negotiated settlement to the war. As neighbors and major regional actors, they can lend potent emphasis to two important diplomatic points amid the settlement talks: that neither Burhan nor the RSF command popular support, and that only a return to some form of civilian rule would likely provide stability and security in the long term.

Without these measures to encourage a settlement and curtail outside interference, Sudan "could once again become an ideal environment for terrorist and criminal networks," as the U.S. Annual Threat Assessment noted.

Jonathan Campbell-James formerly served in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Iraq with the British Army's Intelligence Corps. He currently runs a consultancy focused on political risk and due diligence in the Gulf region. ♦

RECOMMENDED



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