POLICY OUTLOOK

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Gold, Guns, and Geopolitics: The Sudan Conflict and Its Regional Implications

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(Mahmoud Hjaj - Anadolu Agency)

This research paper explores the complex geopolitical landscape surrounding the ongoing conflict in Sudan. The country's strategic location along the Red Sea and its abundant natural resources, particularly gold, have attracted the attention of various regional and international actors. Each of these countries appears to be pursuing its strategic interests in the region, contributing to the multifaceted nature of the conflict. The paper examines the roles of several nations and key players, focusing on the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Russia, and Libyan militia leader Khalifa Haftar, in shaping the dynamics of the Sudanese conflict. It investigates how these countries' involvement intersects with local factors, potentially influencing the conflict's trajectory and complicating efforts towards resolution. By analysing these international dimensions, the research aims to provide insights into the broader regional implications of the Sudan conflict and the challenges of achieving stability in the country.

The opinions expressed in this policy outlook represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the TRT World Research Centre.

Introduction

The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) originated from the Janjaweed militias, which played a significant role in the Darfur conflict in the 2000s. These militias were mobilised by the regime of long-serving President Omar al-Bashir to assist the army in suppressing a rebellion in Darfur. During the conflict, widespread human rights abuses occurred, prompting the International Criminal Court to charge Sudanese government officials and militia commanders with genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Over time, the militia grew, becoming the RSF in 2013, primarily tasked with border security. In 2015, the RSF deployed troops to Yemen to fight alongside Saudi and Emirati forces, marking the rise of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, on the international stage. That same year, the RSF was granted the status of a "regular force," and in 2017, a law officially recognised it as an independent security entity.

However, tensions between the RSF and the regular army, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), emerged during the political transition following the removal of Omar al-Bashir in 2019, particularly over the integration of forces. By April 2023, disputes between Hemedti and General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of SAF, had escalated. Hemedti criticised the 2021 coup led by al-Burhan, and the army issued warnings of potential conflict. This rift eventually led to intense fighting on April 15, 2023, rapidly becoming a full-scale war. Khartoum, the capital, became a war zone, and the army shifted its headquarters to Port Sudan as the conflict spread across the country. This devastating conflict is just the latest chapter in Sudan's long history of political violence and instability, which has plagued the country since its independence in 1956.

Since the onset of the recent conflict, over 61,000 people have lost their lives, and around eight million have been displaced, either within the country or seeking refuge in Egypt, Ethiopia, Chad, South Sudan, or Saudi Arabia. Sudan now bears the significant burden of hosting the world's largest population of individuals displaced by conflict. The country is also facing the imminent threat of widespread famine. Furthermore, the healthcare system's collapse means the devastation's true scale remains undetermined. In Khartoum, the capital, entire neighbourhoods are being systematically destroyed, block by block.

The rival protagonists, bolstered by support and backing from foreign entities, militia leaders remain entrenched in the belief that military might, rather than political dialogue, will bring about a resolution. However, without foreign support, these warring parties would likely be unable to sustain the conflict at its current intensity. This underscores the critical role that some regional and international powers play in either prolonging or potentially helping resolve the Sudan crisis.

Countries such as Russia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) view the Sudanese conflict as an opportunity to exploit the country's natural resources and gain access to its ports along the Red Sea for strategic leverage. Control of these ports provides a strategic edge in regional and global trade and significant military advantages. This has made Sudan a focal point for countries seeking to expand their influence in the Horn of Africa and the broader Red Sea region.

Jihad Mashamoun, a Political Analyst on Sudanese Affairs, commented, "Egypt and Saudi Arabia provide political and military support to General al-Burhan, as he is, despite all, still representing the Sudanese state institutions. Egypt believes those institutions protect its southern borders from smuggling operations, terrorist groups and the influx of refugees. In the same sense, Saudi Arabia seeks to protect its western shores to secure its investments that are tied to its Saudi Vision 2030. General Hemedti and the RSF continue to get support from the UAE, Eastern Libya, Chad and Russia, who have been providing the RSF with military equipment, drones, machinery, and transit points for the recruitment of soldiers in counterpart for the smuggling of Sudanese gold to the UAE and Russia by the RSF".

Sudan's important geographical position along the Red Sea, its access to the Nile River, and its rich gold reserves have long attracted the attention of foreign powers. In the aftermath of Omar al-Bashir's overthrow in 2019, the two generals now at war have strategically used these valuable assets to build alliances. They have forged connections with regional and global powers who have vested interests in the outcome of their struggle for military and political dominance in Sudan.

Sudan's Strife: The Scramble for Gold

Sudan is a significant producer of gold in the world. The World Gold Council reported that in 2023, Sudan ranked as the 16th largest gold producer worldwide. It comes fourth in gold production in Africa, after Ghana, Mali, and South Africa. According to reports, Hemedti gained control over numerous gold mines in Sudan. This acquisition of mining assets occurred as he developed a close relationship with Omar al-Bashir, who ruled Sudan as its head of state for three decades.

Gold has played a significant role in fuelling the Sudanese conflict. Reportedly, the RSF is more heavily involved in the gold trade, but both sides have been smuggling and selling vast amounts of gold to fund their military operations. According to a report, the UAE plays a key role in the gold smuggling operations connected to Sudan's ongoing conflict. Statistics for 2022 highlight that the UAE imported 39 tons of gold from Sudan, valued at more than $2 billion, and direct shipments of Sudanese gold continue today. Criminal syndicates and non-state actors also smuggle Sudanese gold into Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and



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Uganda, all of which end up in the UAE market. Reportedly, over 60 tons reached the UAE through these routes in 2022. In a May 2023 business risk advisory, the US State Department noted that the UAE receives "nearly all" the gold exported from Sudan.

As Sudan's most valuable resource and top export, gold has become a key funding source for both warring parties. The RSF has tightened control over gold mining sites in Darfur, including retaking the major Jebel Amer site, to finance their war efforts. Jebel Amer holds significant economic and strategic value for the RSF, as it is one of Sudan's richest gold mining areas, providing substantial revenue to fund their war efforts and strengthen their operational capabilities. They have also seized gold worth hundreds of millions of dollars from refineries and banks in Khartoum.

Meanwhile, the internationally recognised government in Khartum, embodied by the SAF, controls gold production in other regions, shifting exports to Egypt to avoid feeding the UAE markets. Still, an estimated 50-80% of Sudan's gold is smuggled primarily through the UAE, with the true value being two to three times higher than official records. This illicit trade involves complex transnational networks, including connections with neighbouring countries like Chad, Libya, and the Central African Republic. The warring parties leverage these networks to exchange gold for weapons, vehicles, and other war supplies. Ultimately, the continued access to gold revenues and associated smuggling routes is sustaining both sides' ability to wage war, making it a critical factor in the conflict's persistence.

UAE's Sudan Strategy: Eastern Libya as a Launchpad

The UAE supports the RSF in Sudan's conflict for several strategic reasons. The UAE sees the RSF as a reliable ally that would preserve its strategic and economic interests. By backing the RSF, the UAE aims to extend its influence in Sudan and secure access to valuable resources, particularly gold. Additionally, the UAE is very interested in ports, and Sudan's strategic location in the Red Sea makes it an attractive partner. Control over Sudanese ports would allow the UAE to expand its maritime presence, strengthen its position in regional trade routes, and counter the influence of rival powers in the region. This aligns with the UAE's broader strategy of establishing a network of ports and military bases across the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.

Andreas Krieg, An associate professor at the Defence Studies Department of King's College London, argues that "Ever since Hemedti provided thousands of boots on the ground to the Saudi- and UAE-led war in Yemen, the warlord has become an important node, especially in Emirati networks, across the region. Operating alongside Abu Dhabi's proxy in Yemen - the militias of the Southern Transitional Council, Hemedti received arms and salaries for his mercenaries".

John Prendergast, Co-Founder of the Sentry and the author of Congo Stories: Battling Five Centuries of Exploita-



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tion and Greed, commented that "The SRF leader Hemedti's reliance on the UAE, however, has been consistent. By the late 2010s, Hemedti's trade in gold had made him one of the country's wealthiest men. After taking over one of Sudan's most lucrative mines in 2017, Hemedti used that wealth to cement a leading position in the country's kleptocratic political system. As his role in the gold trade increased, his connections with Dubai's leaders deepened; beginning in the mid-2010s, he supplied mercenary forces to fight for the UAE's interests in Libya and Yemen".

On January 7, the then US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that the RSF had perpetrated genocide in Darfur, the western region of the country. Blinken imposed sanctions on Hemedti. Additionally, he sanctioned seven companies based in the UAE that the RSF owned. According to the US Treasury Department, these firms have provided the RSF with armaments and financial resources to support their operations.

Multiple credible reports have identified the UAE as a pivotal global centre for gold laundering, particularly as the primary destination for illicitly trafficked gold from Africa. A comprehensive study by Swiss-aid revealed that in 2022 alone, an estimated 405 tons of gold were smuggled from sub-Saharan Africa to the UAE. Industry experts and analysts have highlighted that substantial quantities of smuggled gold, which remain undeclared in their countries of origin, undergo a process of de facto legitimisation upon entering the UAE. This transformation from illicit to seemingly legal status reinforces the UAE's position as a key facilitator in the global gold laundering ecosystem.

A UN report claimed that the UAE is supporting the RSF by funnelling illegally smuggled gold from Sudan, often in collaboration with Wagner-linked firms. Wagner is a Russian private military company known for its involvement in various conflicts, including Sudan and Libya. The gold is then laundered and introduced into the global market. The UAE serves as a key hub for refining gold from the region, including that smuggled by Wagner-affiliated companies. The UN's Sudan experts also found that the UAE

is providing military support to the RSF, breaching a UN weapons ban. According to UN and media reports, the UAE is directly supplying the RSF with military equipment, including artillery, rocket launchers, armed drones, and portable anti-aircraft missiles. The UAE, however, denies the allegations, dismissing them as propaganda and insisting that the shipments were solely carrying humanitarian aid to Sudan.

Haftar and Hemedti

Haftar and Hemedti share striking parallels in their approach to power. Both militia warlords have demonstrated a reluctance to submit to civilian authority, instead opting to build their parallel military organisations outside the traditional chain of command. Haftar commands Libya's self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA), while Hemedti leads Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF). These parallel structures have allowed both men to amass significant political influence, effectively blurring the lines between military and civilian leadership in their respective countries. Both figures have leveraged their military might to carve out prominent roles in the political landscape, often operating with a degree of autonomy that challenges the authority of civilian governments. Their actions have contributed to the instability and fragmentation of state institutions in both Libya and Sudan, complicating efforts at democratic transition and state-building.

The Libyan militia leader Khalifa Haftar has helped the RSF logistically. Haftar has reportedly allowed Russian Wagner Group mercenaries to use airbases under his control in eastern Libya to supply weapons to the RSF. Specifically, Russian transport planes were observed flying from Al-Khadim and Al-Jufra bases in Libya, which are controlled by Haftar, to airdrop weaponry to RSF forces in Sudan. This support was critical days after fighting broke out in Khartoum in April 2023. Haftar's backing of Hemedti aligns with his broader regional ambitions and creates new avenues to expand his influence. Moreover, by facilitating Wagner's operations, Haftar strengthened his ties with Russia and the UAE, securing military and logistical support crucial for maintaining his foothold in Libya.

Alex de Waal, Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, commented, "Hemedti's 15-year career shows his prowess as a political-military entrepreneur. In Darfur, his forces took over the region's artisanal gold mines, defeating rival commanders. He has also proved adroit in dealing with local chiefs and militia leaders who buy and sell their loyalties to the highest bidder. He has built ties to major regional powers by renting out the RSF to fight in Yemen on behalf of Saudi Arabia and the UAE and by forging links with General Khalifa Haftar, head of the self-styled Libyan National Army, and with Wagner, the Russian private military company affiliated with the Kremlin. Despite their reputation as ruffians from the sticks, RSF troops are battle-tested, disciplined, and armed to the teeth".

The 2011 Libyan civil war, which led to Muammar Gaddafi's downfall, saw an influx of Sudanese militias seeking weapons under the pretence of defending the crumbling regime. As the conflict neared its end, pro-Gaddafi forces distributed arms to these mercenaries, resulting in a proliferation of weapons throughout the Sahel region. The involvement of Sudanese and Chadian mercenaries in Libya intensified when Khalifa Haftar launched his campaign to capture Tripoli in April 2019. These mercenaries have gained financial rewards and enhanced military skills by participating in the Libyan conflict.

Jason Burke, International security correspondent of the Guardian, wrote, "The trucks are carrying fuel from a refinery near the Libyan oasis town of al-Jawf as well as smaller consignments of ammunition, weapons and medicine the RSF. They are being sent by Khalifa Haftar, a warlord who runs much of eastern Libya. Other supplies, including potent Kornet anti-tank missiles looted from Libyan government stocks more than a decade ago, have been transported by air, say witnesses at al-Jawf's airport".

Khalifa Haftar's involvement in the Sudanese conflict in support of Hemedti's RSF milia group is driven by a complex web of strategic alliances, shared interests, and mutual benefits. Haftar and Hemedti have cultivated strong relationships with key regional players, particularly the UAE and Russia, which have provided them with financial and military support. Their alliance is rooted in a history of reciprocal assistance, as evidenced by Hemedti's deployment of hundreds of fighters to assist the Libyan militia leader Haftar launched a failed attempt to seize Libya's capital, Tripoli, from the internationally recognised government in 2019.

According to a WSJ report, Haftar and Hemedti allied with the UAE, which supported Haftar militarily in fighting political rivals and hired Hemedti's men to fight in Yemen. The two have also worked with the Kremlin-backed private military contractor Wagner. Haftar hosts the paramilitaries at his bases in Libya. Hemedti has struck lucrative gold mining partnerships with the group, headed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian businessman and close associate of President Vladimir Putin.

Russia's Libya Pivot: Gateway to the Sahel

Russia has played a significant role in Sudan's ongoing conflict, supporting both the SAF and the RSF. Wagner Group, a mercenary group linked to the Russian government, has supplied weapons to the RSF. Simultaneously, Russia backs the SAF to secure access to Sudan's strategi-



Source: MEE

cally important Red Sea coast. This dual support strategy allows Russia to maintain influence regardless of which side prevails.

According to a UK Foreign Affairs Committee report, Before the current conflict, Russia had established connections in Sudan, with documented flights between Russian air bases and Port Sudan, allegedly used for gold smuggling operations. Russia's involvement in Sudan is closely tied to its activities in Libya, particularly through the Wagner Group and its support for Khalifa Haftar. Wagner has been using bases in Libya, such as Al Jufra and Al Khadim, under Haftar's control, to facilitate operations in Sudan. These bases have been used to launch supply flights to the RSF, demonstrating the interconnected nature of Russia's regional strategy. This connection between Libya and Sudan allows Russia to extend its influence across North Africa and the Sahel region, leveraging its military and economic presence.

According to reports, Moscow is significantly expanding its military footprint in Libya, focusing on the Maaten Al Sarra base, strategically located at the border of Chad and Sudan. This installation has emerged as the epicentre of a major Russian initiative to consolidate influence over the Sahel region. This area has become increasingly crucial to Moscow's geopolitical goals. In December 2024, Russia deployed a group of Syrian soldiers to revitalise the base, intending to transform it into a pivotal hub for military operations across Africa. From this vantage point, Russia aims to directly support its interests in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Sudan. This development signals a new chapter in Russia's African expansion strategy following the erosion of its stronghold in Syria in the wake of Bashar al-Assad's regime collapse.



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Türkiye's Mediation Efforts

Türkiye has shifted its diplomatic focus to Sudan, aiming to mediate the ongoing civil conflict between the country's warring factions, following its success in resolving tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia. In January 2025, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, Sudan's military leader, expressed openness to Ankara's mediation efforts in the conflict, especially in relation to the UAE. The UAE has similarly signalled its support for Türkiye's role, with the Emirati Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledging Türkiye's "diplomatic efforts" to address Sudan's crisis.

While the African Union has been largely absent in conflict resolution efforts, Türkiye has shifted its diplomatic focus to Sudan, aiming to mediate in the ongoing civil conflict has taken the lead, actively mediating in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Sudan, and establishing itself as a key diplomatic player in the region. The timing of its diplomatic involvement in Sudan could not be more auspicious, as both the legitimate government forces SAF and the RSF seem open to negotiations, especially after the SAF re-captured Wad Madani, a strategic city in southeastern Sudan that had been held by the RSF militias for over a year. This marks the latest in a series of victories for the Sudanese army, which has recently regained control of areas surrounding Khartoum and the eastern provinces.

It should be noted that early mediation efforts were hindered by perceptions of bias, with SAF mistrusting some mediators due to their close ties with the RSF and the UAE. Moreover, at the beginning of the conflict, mediators were competing against each other, further complicating the situation.

Conclusion

The ongoing Sudanese conflict is a complex struggle fuelled by the intersection of local power dynamics, foreign interests, and economic incentives. The involvement of international players such as Russia, the UAE, and regional actors like Chad and East Libya's Khalifa Haftar highlights the geopolitical significance of Sudan's resources, particularly its gold reserves and strategic positioning along the Red Sea. This war has devastated the country, displaced millions, and pushed Sudan to the brink of famine.

Based on various reports, the UAE appears to be among the key beneficiaries of the Sudanese conflict, functioning as a major hub for gold laundering from Sudan. Russia's involvement is also significant, supporting both the RSF militias (through the Wagner Group) and the governmental forces. Meanwhile, Türkiye has positioned itself as a potential mediator in the conflict, leveraging its diplomatic success in other conflicts. As the African Union remains absent, Türkiye's mediation efforts could provide a vital opportunity to resolve the deadlock but will require careful balancing of regional interests and continued international support.

Looking forward, any resolution to the Sudanese conflict will likely require addressing the broader regional dynamics and the interests of foreign powers involved. The situation in Sudan serves as a stark reminder of how local conflicts can quickly become proxy wars for larger geopolitical ambitions, with devastating consequences for civilian populations. Ultimately, the path to peace in Sudan will depend on the willingness of both internal and external actors to prioritise stability and development over short-term gains. This may require a coordinated international effort to disincentivise the exploitation of Sudan's resources and to support a genuine, inclusive political process that can lead to sustainable governance and economic recovery.