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**MILITANTS AND THE MILITARY IN SUDAN:
FROM DISPUTE OVER THE ECONOMY TO
WAR**

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ALC Working Papers

**Militants and the Military in Sudan: From Dispute over the
Economy to War**

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Medhane Tadesse is a policy academic on peace and security issues in Africa. With a keenness for public intellectualism and a distinct focus on historical and future trends Medhane has been engaged extensively on the study of violence, governance, and the state. A veteran analyst on the Horn of Africa and an international expert on Security Sector Reform (SSR) he played a crucial role in familiarizing the governance of security at both research and policy levels and served as Senior ASSN SSR advisor to the African Union (AU). He is a founding member of the ALC-T Board of Trustees and sits on the Executive Committee of the African Security Sector Network (ASSN). Currently a senior research fellow on geopolitics based at IMAF/IRD, Paris, Medhane is a visiting professor at African Leadership Centre, King's College London and teaches at SciencesPo, Paris.

The Sudanese military had a dominant control over security and the economy since the independence of the country in 1956, particularly after Jaafar Nimeri's government sought to nationalize various sectors of the economy in the 1960s and 1970s. However, beginning from 2015 it has increasingly lost pre-eminence and is now fighting for survival. The Sudanese state and its military in cohort with the National Intelligence and Security Services/NISS/ have always been trying to squeeze out the peripheries and rural areas to control natural resources with the help of militias. Instead, a different and more profound transformation has been underway in the last ten years as state security institutions appear to have faced a dynamic of dissolution of dominance and rise of paramilitary group altering the balance of political power that has existed in Sudan for long years. Exclusive control of resources and border areas and later externally generated rents helped a paramilitary group, the Rapid Support Forces/RSF/, and its leader to grow into a security and political actor and expand his business interests, with his family taking holdings in key economic sectors of gold mining, livestock, and infrastructure. As a result, the regime, the army and Northern elites have lost not only monopoly of violence in several places but also the resources they used to depend on to maintain power shattering the survival playbook of traditional security institutions.

Taking a point of departure in the dynamics of the civil war and the emergence of new economic networks helps to explain the ways in which the RSF has exploited the upheavals and violence that defined the post-2019 Sudanese transition - to emerge as an expansionist and often predatory business and political actor. The Sudanese Armed Forces led by General al-Burhan viewed the apparent rise of a powerful paramilitary force as a key security and economic player with alarm, even more as the new competitor accelerated and deepened its control on national resources threatening the SAFs own jealously guarded economic interests.

Reflecting on how the transformations in Sudanese political economy and competition among security institutions in a weak state, brought about by decades of war, and changes

in regional security environment altered the balance of political power that has existed in Sudan for long years is instructive. This will take the form of interrogating the evolving role of formal and informal security actors in Sudan's political economy, their evolution overtime and how they increasingly strived to govern the diminishing resources and determine the conditions and distribution of profits between the participants. Alterations in Sudan's economy and security arrangements during the last years of President Omar al-Bashir's rule and changes in regional security environment have led to imbalances in the power of security institutions. The sporadic and chaotic way a militia force came to play a security role at home and abroad starting from 2015 further weakened the residual institutions of the state and traditional security forces. The fall of Bashir in 2019 and the inability of the military to govern alone in the face of ongoing protests shook up political relations in Sudan. The post-2019 transition intensified this shift and deepened the competition among security institutions in response to the regional intensification of 'resource circulation and organized violence' which further explains the particular aspect of external disruptions. Viewed in this way, much can be made of the evidence that challenges conventional assumptions and patterns of external intervention in support of state managers and residual institutions of the state – some of which confirm what is already known in the literature; and others which might belong in the realm of emerging/new evidence.

The Trap of Outsourcing Violence

The rising role of Rapid Support Forces/RSF/ in Sudanese political economy and the decline of traditional security institutions constituted the pinnacle of successive events, one that stemmed from the specific counterinsurgency tactics and the burgeoning economic crunch, the calculations of power consolidation by a threatened leader and the ability of non-state security actors to leverage foreign support. The way the RSF, which was originally founded as the "Janjaweed" in Darfur and later co-opted into Omar Al-Bashir's regime, who ruled Sudan from 1989 to 2019, ended up at the center of politics is a novel

one. One answer – focussing on this goes back to 2015 when they stood to attract domestic and external players to serve as security apparatus and fight in foreign wars. This has facilitated RSFs control of large border areas up to the Libyan border and benefit from the trans-Saharan smuggling trade. The turning point was however the war in Yemen when the RSF, alongside the Sudan’s army, began sending troops-at one point reaching tens of thousands to fight in the war allowing its leader Hemedti to forge ties with the Gulf powers. While Yemen’s Houthi rebellion did not pose any threat to Sudan’s security or national interests, RSF forces from Sudan, paid for by the UAE and Saudi Arabia provided the biggest foreign component of the anti-Houthi army since 2015 which only served to empower the RSF and cement relations with the Gulf states independent of Khartoum and that continued into the post-al-Bashir period. This had a dual effect: the RSF got additional, largely unaccounted for, financial resources and unsupervised diplomatic profile; making it to acquire additional weaponry and diplomatic clout.

Around the same time President Bashir Omar al-Bashir began to rely on the RSF as his primary protection force in case of political or military challenges to his rule. The paramilitary group had long paraded in the peripheries. But it wasn’t until 2014 it began to have a daily presence in the capital, Khartoum. The actions of President Bashir cannot be totally delinked from the changing political economy brought about by decades of war. His capacity for running a robust patronage network has been degraded by long years of international sanctions but mainly the rising control of the remaining available resources by the RSF which relentlessly started expanding its roots and networks throughout the country taking advantage of both the regime’s vulnerability and concessions. A by-product of the long running war in Darfur and the regimes over dependence on militias for counterinsurgency operations is territoriality, as the government and its army increasingly lost actual control on the ground in mid 2015. This did not only enrich the RSF and strengthen its forces, but it also enabled it to deny Sudanese regime and elites at the center their extractive governance capabilities in one of the largest regions of the country. This is illustrative of how the unhindered role of shadowy groups in war zones is often a

strong predictor of low state capacity, irrespective of whether states or their military appear to be “outsourcing” violence. In this regard, the RSF hasn’t changed the nature of center-periphery relations and its political economy underpinnings which has been violently rapacious through history but sought to replace the Northern elites and continued the patterns of authoritarian and extractive control, and even prospering on the *pillage* and the disorder in the peripheries which became characteristic of the groups’ income generating practices.

Disruptions to Pre-existing Economic and Security Structures

The RSFs intensification of organised violence and control of resource and supply chains has taken many forms, such as the control of smuggling routes along Sudan’s Western and North-Western borders and allows it to trade with other countries. And at a greater scale, significant access to Gold mining and transit. Notable that an estimated 75% of the gold mined in the country disappears on the black market and most or all of it to Dubai. Another is the widespread violence involved in the commercialization of the essential livestock production where alliances between traders and violent entrepreneurs have been instrumental in enabling the lucrative livestock export to the Gulf countries. Also, as the subsequent analysis would indicate, there is a close connection between the capacity for organized violence and large investments necessary for acquiring and building ports along the Red Sea as demonstrated by external involvement in the ongoing war in Sudan. The UN confirms the RSF is using large-scale proceeds from gold mining to fund the UAE-backed war against the SAF.

Not unrelated to these are the policy rents linked to the conduct of foreign relations as the foreign office became a major battleground between the SAF, RSF and civilian leadership during the post-2019 transition period, which came to an end when the military staged a coup in October 2021. Regional actors were also involved in Sudan’s military coup against

al-Bashir, the military's decision to try and rule on its own, and when that initiative failed, to launch another coup on 25 October 2021 against the civilian wing of the transitional government headed by Abdallah Hamdok. The civil-military transitional government also failed because the military still had considerable power resources at its disposal. This was pronounced by the the revival of populist and nationalistic politics and alliances as both the RSF and the army as well as civilian political forces struggled to navigate the immense economic and social challenges that generated mass protest movements. Whereas the civilian revolutionary forces largely regarded the RSF as a potential ally in democratic transition (a now dated understanding), the military has come to regard the paramilitary group as a rival economic and security actor.

The Scramble for the Military Dominated Economy

Both the RSF and the army are heavily involved with other parts of the economy which is intertwined with the specific external relations both sides had come to cultivate. The RSF broke with a legacy of state monopoly of Sudanese external engagements to spawn a privileged relations with Gulf powers and Russia, whereas its military counterpart, the SAF led by Burhan behaved contrarily, sometimes toying with Israel and close ties with Egypt which agreed on the idea of promoting a single army in Sudan. The SAF has had close relations with Iran mainly in refurbishing its military industrial complex which had since changed hands to military cooperation with the Gulf powers and recently far closer relations with Egypt. The importance of these dynamics was graphically demonstrated when control [over 200 military-run enterprises](#) seemed to emerge as a key arena of contestation leading to war that calls into question Sudan's long existing social, political and economic order.

RSF leaders were not sharing their own businesses but encroaching into the traditional military dominated economic spheres. The military had been forced to deal with an

unfamiliar pressure, as it must negotiate with a parliamentary group from a new standing courting other potential domestic and external partners as it seeks to maintain its privileged status. The above analysis, however, suggests that access to Sudan's [military dominated economy](#) further escalated the conflict and as talks essentially become a subterranean devise by both for grabbing the economic resources and influence controlled by the other. Once the RSF felt this was not possible and that a continuation of military hold on politics and economy would constrain rather than enable its interests, it decided to strike. And perhaps it is not a surprise that one of the earliest [attacks](#) which triggered the war in April 2023 happened in the Northeastern part of the country where rich mineral resources, hitherto remained outside of its control. The emergence of a parliamentary force as an aggressive security and business actor totally changed the political dynamics in Sudan, leading to head-on competition or confrontation with the army which continued to seek a dominant part in the economy, eventually leading to war, not to mention its damaging role to political democratization.

Conclusion

The Sudanese military, which remained the political bulwark of most of Sudanese regimes since independence, have recently lost a great deal of power and influence altering the balance of forces and governance structures that has existed in Sudan for long years. The war between the SAF and RSF thus symbolises fundamental changes in Sudan's political system. Regardless of the outcome of the war, the future of Sudan now appears unfathomable. The most pressing issue is how to end the war or what kind of peace deal would be acceptable to both sides and whether the Sudanese military will be willing to become one actor among many, and whether such a possibility would generate different political arrangements. In this respect, less promising signs come from Sudanese protagonists and their external backers. Like most countries in the Middle East and unlike the claims of the RSF or its civilian allies, both warring parties have no interest in promoting democracy and they both embrace the violent and extractive governance built over the years. It seems unreasonable that a more competitive politics will emerge particularly

because the battle for Sudan is taking place within the coercive apparatus at the Center, not on its periphery and not between it and the democracy movement. That is not good news for those calling for political and economic reforms or oppressed groups in the peripheries struggling for their rights. Quite the contrary, this may constitute a long-term disruption of democratic politics in Sudan.



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The **African Leadership Centre (ALC)** was established in Kenya in June 2010 as an initiative of the Conflict, Security & Development Group (CSDG) at King's College London. Its overall goal is to build a new community of leaders generating cutting-edge knowledge for peace, security and development in Africa. To that end, it works to build the capacity of individuals, communities and institutions across Africa which can contribute to peace and stability.

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