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Sudan's World War

The 15 April marked the two-year anniversary of a civil war in Sudan that has left tens of thousands dead and millions displaced. I published an essay in *Sidecar*, 'Gunshots in Khartoum', two days after the war began, which tried to trace its emergent lineaments. The conflict initially pitted the Sudanese army against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – a paramilitary organization formed during the reign of dictator Omar al Bashir (1989-2019). In the war's first weeks, the RSF overran much of Khartoum, Sudan's capital, including the Presidential Palace. Initially constructed in 1825, during the Turkish-Egyptian colonisation of Sudan, the palace was the headquarters of an imperial regime intent on enslaving and plundering the rest of the country. The last governor of Turco-Egyptian Sudan (1820-1885), Charles Gordon, was killed by Mahdist insurgents on the steps of the palace in 1885. Successive regimes would retain both the exploitative tendencies of the Turco-Egyptian colonialists, and their obsession with the Presidential Palace. After the Mahdists demolished it, the British rebuilt it during their colonial occupation of Sudan (1898-1955). It became the 'Republican Palace' after Sudanese independence in 1956, and then – albeit briefly – the 'People's Palace' during the reign of Jafaar Nimeiri (1969-1985). Bashir, who took power in a coup in 1989, ordered the construction of a new palace, next to the old one, built and funded by the Chinese. He didn't get to stay long in his new abode. A wave of protests in 2018-19, triggered by cuts to grain and fuel subsidies, ended his regime.

A transitional government was established in 2019, which saw civilian politicians uncomfortably share power with the leaders of Sudan's security services: Abdul Fattah Al Burhan, the chief of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), was made the head of a Sovereign Council, while Mohamed Hamdan Daglo (also known as Hemedti), the RSF's leader, became his deputy. The two men soon conspired to push the civilians out of power. In October 2021,

I wandered through a Potemkin protest organized outside the palace, masterminded by the security services, which used the astroturfed unrest as a rhetorical justification for an *autogolpe* later that month. Bashir had multiplied his security services as a means of coup-proofing his regime, making sure that no single organ was strong enough to seize power. Each had its own economic empire, which included construction, real estate and banks. It was perhaps inevitable that the two most powerful of the Hydra's heads, the RSF and the Sudanese army, would turn on each other and compete for control of the capital. After almost two years of conflict, on 21 March 2025, the Sudanese army finally retook the Presidential Palace, and pushed the RSF out of almost all of Khartoum. Jubilant soldiers posed in front of the ruined palace, its walls pockmarked by bullet holes. Two weeks ago, one European diplomat asked me expectantly: does this mean the war is over?

The palace, like Sudanese sovereignty, now lies empty. What began as a battle to control the state has morphed into a war that has no clear end in sight. Both the RSF and the Sudanese army were initially weak military actors without broad social bases. They have waged war in the manner of their mentor, Bashir, who played ethnic groups against each other, and outsourced his counterinsurgency campaigns to militia forces. Both the RSF and the army have created unruly coalitions of communitarian self-defence forces and mercenary fighters. The local dynamics set in motion by this strategy have become disarticulated from the fight for control of the Sudanese state. For the young Hamar and Misseriya men fighting in the Kordofan region of southern Sudan, struggles over land and resources have become existential, and left wounds that a national-level ceasefire could not heal, were one ever to be agreed. A struggle for control of the palace has ignited a hundred wars across the country.

The centrifugal fragmentation of Sudan's conflict has been funded by regional actors, for whom land in Kordofan is not a *heimat* but a business opportunity. The RSF's major backer is the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which hopes to augment its domination of Sudan's lucrative gold trade with the acquisition of a port on the Red Sea, and control of the country's rich agricultural land. Behind the Sudanese army stands its longstanding supporter, Egypt, along with a motley crew composed of Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. International diplomatic efforts to end Sudan's civil war start from a presumption that the nations involved would prefer a stable, sovereign Sudan, with a single government. This is not necessarily the case. For those arming Sudan's belligerents, war can bring with it as many opportunities for profit as peace, and it might be easier to exert influence over a fractured, broken Sudan. Sovereignty may not return to the palace.

Areas of control in Sudan, as of 1 April 2025. Sources: Thomas van Linge, *Economist*.

At the outset, it was almost possible to believe in a quick RSF victory. Bashir had created the paramilitary organization from Arab-identifying groups in Darfur, in the west of Sudan, in order to fight a counterinsurgency against rebels largely drawn from the region's non-Arab communities, such as the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa. At the beginning of the current war, the RSF's numerical superiority allowed it to rapidly take control of Darfur, which became its redoubt, aside from the city of El Fasher, where it faced resistance from the Zaghawa. In Kordofan, the RSF forged alliances with local militias by offering them what were effectively franchises in the monopoly of violence. The Sudanese army was soon reduced to a series of embattled garrison-towns. By the end of the first year of the conflict, the RSF had used its momentum to strike deep into central Sudan, far from its Darfuri heartland, capturing two important cities to the south of Khartoum: Wad Medani, the capital of Al Jazira state, one of the breadbaskets of Sudan, and Sinjah, in Sennar state. These losses humiliated the army, which had melted away before the RSF's advances.

The paramilitaries were the better fighters. They were already battle-hardened from combat in Darfur and in Yemen, where the RSF had served as a mercenary force for the UAE and Saudi Arabia in their war with the Houthis. Its advance into central Sudan was assisted by

shipments of weapons from the Emirates – including anti-tank missiles – and from Wagner, which has its eye on RSF-controlled gold mines in southern Darfur. The real story of the RSF's success, though, is the Sudanese army's failure. Despite its overwhelming aerial superiority, in the first year of the war the army had few soldiers willing to die for a sclerotic officer corps that had decamped to Port Sudan on the Red Sea, which became the army's *de facto* capital. Although the army was absurdly recognized by the United Nations as Sudan's legitimate government – which enabled it to block humanitarian convoys into RSF-held territory – by June 2024, its control of much of the country was nominal.

Yet even at the summit of its success, the RSF faced challenges that Hemedti was unable to solve. A former camel smuggler and furniture shop owner from the Awlad Mansour branch of the Mahariya Riziegat, a Darfuri Arab community, Hemedti has long been considered an uneducated interloper from the peripheries by his rivals in Khartoum. Since the war began, he has had to play several, sometimes conflicting roles at once: not only leader of a war machine but CEO of a transnational business empire with interests in gold and weapons. The RSF is not a standing army, but rather a series of militias, largely recruited through martial mobilizations known as *faza'a*, organized by the customary authorities of Darfur's Arab communities. The RSF used these militias to fight in Khartoum, but the instrumentalization was mutual: Darfuri communities also used RSF resources to wage their own local struggles. In El Geneina, West Darfur, Arab militias ethnically cleansed the Masalit, forcing the survivors across the border into Chad, in what the US government declared was a genocide.

Hemedti's political aims are often at cross-purposes with the concessions he must make to keep together the coalition of Arab communitarian militias that constitute his war machine. The ethnic cleansing of the Masalit proved a military success for these militias, but a political disaster for Hemedti. International opprobrium proved less problematic than the repercussions in Darfur. That the RSF had become a vehicle for Arab supremacism undermined Hemedti's prospects of positioning himself as a revolutionary leader who can unite Sudan's oppressed peripheries – an idea that he had flirted with when trying to find political allies after Bashir's fall. Concerned that they would soon share the fate of the Masalit, many of Darfur's non-Arab communities, such as the Zaghawa, threw in their lot with the army, even though they had been fighting against the Sudanese state for over two decades. Chadian Zaghawa crossed the nominal border between the two countries into North Darfur, and are taking part in the defence of El Fasher, which – as of 17 April – has still not fallen. The city has become a sink-hole for the RSF, swallowing men and resources, and forcing its focus away from Khartoum and central Sudan. For the people of North Darfur, the

paramilitaries have proved a curse: placed under an RSF siege, humanitarian conditions deteriorated to such an extent in Zamzam, a camp for the displaced that adjoins El Fasher, that it was stricken by famine – before, on 13 April, the RSF overran it, killing hundreds of civilians and forcing almost half a million people to flee.

Hemedti's war machine is predicated on continual expansion. Since the RSF offers its recruits licence to loot and raid in lieu of wages, absent fresh targets, its forces have a tendency to disperse. In every city it captures, the RSF has employed the same playbook: destroy state institutions, plunder humanitarian resources, raze civilian property. Its assaults have functioned as an enormous engine of primitive accumulation that has destroyed agricultural land, displaced millions of people, and effected a wealth transfer from Sudan's poorest to a class of militia leaders backed by Emirati capital. Though the RSF claims to have established civil administrations in the areas under its control, all too often it has clashed with local populations. As its battlefield advances slowed, the RSF turned to extracting profits from the very bodies of those it dominates; kidnappings in paramilitary-held areas have become rampant.

Of course, the RSF don't see the situation this way. The youthful militia members who joyfully film themselves carrying purloined sheet metal from Khartoum to Darfur speak about 'over-turning the 1956 state'. The Sudanese state, from the outset, was structured by centre-periphery relations that saw the northern riverine cities clustered around the capital exploiting the country's hinterlands for labour and resources. According to the young fighters availing themselves of the spoils of war, the RSF is simply returning to Darfur what was stolen from it. The rhetoric doesn't match the actuality. Darfur's cities, such as Nyala and Zalingei, were also looted by the RSF. The paramilitaries have generalized the predatory political economy of Bashir's regime. While Bashir exploited the peripheries to enrich the centre, the RSF has turned the entire country into a periphery to be plundered.

The RSF's mode of warfare has ultimately proved its undoing. Its use of sexual violence and mass executions as weapons of war have been a propaganda gift for the Sudanese army, which raised militia forces of its own by conjuring all too credible spectres of invading marauders from the west. In October 2024, the pendulum began to swing back to the army. After paying for the defection of one leading RSF commander, Abu Aqla Keikal, it retook Wad Medani, and by the end of 2024, had managed to reverse almost all of the paramilitary group's gains in the centre of Sudan. As of 17 April 2025, the RSF has lost Khartoum and largely been restricted to Darfur and Kordofan.

The Sudanese army's resurgence is partly due to its successful solicitation of foreign support. Qatar – keen to block its Emirati rival – bankrolled the army's purchase of Chinese and Russian fighter jets, while Egyptian military intelligence has overseen targeting operations for drones newly arrived from both Iran and Turkey. Yet it would be a mistake to overplay the importance of the new kit. The army's success principally derives from having emulated Bashir, outsourcing the fighting to militias, while pivoting back to the Islamist political bloc that undergirded the early years of the dictatorship. Bashir's Islamist supporters had been upended by the revolution in 2019; 'the war', one former member of his intelligence service explained to me last year, 'offers us a second chance'. The conflict has afforded the Islamists the opportunity to reconstitute their military forces and expand into the upper echelons of the Sudanese army. Islamist groups, such as the Al Bara' Ibn Malik Battalion, fight next to *mustanfereen*, or popular mobilizations: communities that have taken up the weapons offered them by the army. Burhan has built a fighting force, but only by ceding power to his coalition members. Victory on the battlefield has come at the price of further fragmentation that makes the reconstitution of the country, and the achievement of long-term peace, harder than ever to envisage. In Al Jazira state, one friend told me, 'we never used to ask… But now the first question we pose to a stranger is which village they are from.' Communities have turned in on themselves, and the national compact has shrunk accordingly.

The last two years of war have lain waste to the country. Over 150,000 people are estimated to have died. Sudan is the world's worst humanitarian crisis. It's also the world's worst displacement crisis: 13 million people have fled from their homes. Nearly two-thirds of the population is in dire need of humanitarian assistance, including 16 million children. In December 2024, the Famine Review Committee of the Integrated Phase Classification – the world's gold standard in measuring food insecurity – predicted that famine would occur in North Darfur and South Kordofan. The humanitarian response for 2025, though, is less than 10% funded. Trump's cuts to foreign aid have rendered this unliveable situation even more intolerable: 75% of the emergency response rooms, organizations set up by Sudanese activists to provide food and medical care across the country, have closed, after they ran out of money. Sudan's healthcare system has entirely collapsed. Much of Khartoum is a graveyard. The belligerents rule over ruins.

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Following a series of defeats, and in an increasingly paranoid atmosphere created by Keikal's defection, the RSF attempted to change its fortunes by holding a conference in Nairobi at the end of February, which announced a political charter that would lead to the formation of a

parallel government. Community leaders from Darfur arrived on fake Chadian passports and thronged the hotels of the Kenyan capital, where they met with rebel leaders from factions that have decided to back the RSF. Kenya itself received a handsome payment from the UAE to host the conference. Its proximity to Hemedti is part of a regional realignment around the RSF that has also seen Emirati dollars flow to South Sudan, Chad, Ethiopia and Uganda. None of these countries has formally come out as a supporter of the RSF, just as the UAE itself has denied that it is bankrolling the paramilitary group. Emirati petrodollars grease the wheels of business networks: every country in its sphere of influence benefits from the gold leaving Sudan, almost all of which flows to the UAE. On 15 April, the RSF declared a 'Government of Peace and Unity', just as its forces razed Zamzam camp. The Sudanese army will also establish its own government. Some worry that a second partition of Sudan is in the offing, just over a decade after the south broke away. In reality, the country is already partitioned, and the establishment of an RSF government is a public relations exercise; its territories will continue to be ruled by militias backed by regional players who stand to profit from Sudan's continued insertion into global commodity markets.

Despite their conflict on the battlefield, much unites the two belligerent parties. Both are remnants of Bashir's regime – though the army has a much longer history – and both are reliant on external support. Both have exacerbated social cleavages in the country as a means of building up their forces. Both have used famine as a tool of war and restricted humanitarian access. The unity of the two belligerents is not only formal. Business has never been better. Both sides export gold to the UAE, with official annual exports alone – most gold is smuggled – doubling since the war began. Animal exports to the Gulf have also soared (from 2 to 4.7 million head of livestock from 2022-2023). Most of Sudan's livestock comes from Darfur, but is exported via Port Sudan. In this fire-sale of the country's assets, the two sides collaborate.

The belligerent parties are also united by their shared role in splintering the country. Both RSF- and army-held areas are internally divided. A Darfur 'unified' under RSF rule will see clashes between the paramilitaries and non-Arab rebel groups, many of them backed by the Sudanese army, which will be only too happy for Darfur to burn, just as it did before, if the centre of the country can be maintained. Clashes will also occur among those formally loyal to the RSF. Darfuri Arab groups have used RSF support to advance land claims in disputes with other communities that date back to climate-change-induced migrations that began in the 1970s. Inter-ethnic tensions have also emerged over political appointments within the RSF. Hemedti now finds himself in the same position as Bashir, constantly mediating between the

rivalrous militias on which his power depends. The declaration of a parallel government will not overcome these underlying dynamics.

The Sudanese army's rag-tag coalition is also sharply divided, and a split may yet emerge. The Islamists are more interested in building a power base in central Sudan than they are in going to war in Darfur and Kordofan. Some of the officers around Burhan are hostile to the Islamists, as are some of the army's backers, including Egypt. Islamists may yet push for a coup d'état. Whoever is at the helm of an army-led government will have to contend with the monsters it has unleashed: the army has empowered militia leaders who are only notionally loyal to Khartoum and have already brought their communities into conflict with those surrounding them.

Diplomatic efforts by the so-called international community have been risible. The US spent a year trying to bring the two sides to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to agree a ceasefire, even though the Sudanese army had every intention of winning the war on the battlefield. In August 2024, it didn't even show up to peace-talks in Geneva; it was busy using Qatari money to buy Chinese fighter jets. Diplomacy has focused on securing a ceasefire, and then returning to the international recipe that was tried – and failed – after Bashir's fall: a transitional government, the integration of the RSF into the army, and elections. Such an approach reads like a fantasy from the 1990s, when the bookshelves of policy wonks were full of titles like *How to Build a State*.

That era has ended. The Sudanese civil war is at once too local and too international to be addressed by a diplomatic process that focuses on the two belligerents, which have a shaky hold over the militias they have enlisted, and whose businesses profit from the war. The forces breaking apart Sudan are structural, and have parallels elsewhere in the region: the collapse of state capacity, military forces backed by mercenary state- and non-state actors, and the fragmentation of the body politic, are also characteristics of conflict in Yemen, the Central African Republic and Somalia. Increasingly, it seems as though the pieces won't be put back together. In the Horn of Africa at least, the epoch of the nation-state seems to be closing, and the contours of a new 19th century are emerging, in which sovereignty gives way to disarticulated countries controlled by external interests, and fragmented by local dynamics.

If there is a Global War Regime emerging, as Hardt and Mezzadra have suggested, it will not have two poles, as during the Cold War, but multiple co-ordinates. In Sudan, the UAE bankrolls the RSF, but also buys gold from the army and supports some of the Islamists aligned with it. Turkey might be selling drones to Burhan, but Ankara also recently welcomed an official visit from Saddam Haftar, the son of the general controlling Eastern

Libya, who funnels weapons and fuel to the RSF. There is no geopolitical logic of alignment at work here: each country functions like a joint stock company, taking its profits where it can, even if the consequences are politically incoherent. Trump's transactional politics have long been the *MO* of the middle-power countries whose ranks America seems determined to join.

In such a transactional Global War Regime, the space for resistance is fissiparous. Sudan's resistance committees – the horizontally organized local activists that brought down Bashir – have been targeted by both the army and the paramilitaries. Some have taken up arms and fight next to the Islamists whom they pushed out of power. Others formed the emergency response rooms which, in the absence of state support and international humanitarians organizations, have heroically provided health services and food across the country. If one looks carefully, one can see, amid the ruins of Sudan, a genuinely national network of mutual aid groups. Their survival is uncertain. The forces pulling Sudan apart have little interest in ending this war, which has created the sort of enclave capitalism that will likely be characteristic of the Horn of Africa in decades to come.

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Read on: Joshua Craze, 'Taxonomies of Hunger', NLR 148.