

The Implications of the Current War for the Chad-Sudan Relationship



Refugees along the Chad Sudan border; photo by Jehanne Henry

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Introduction

Chad and Sudan's politics coped with dramatic changes in 2021. Massive popular protests and international pressures obliged Omar Al Bashir to be arrested in March 2019 in Khartoum. After months of confrontations with the civilians, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) led by General Abdel Fattah Al Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagolo "Hemedti" agreed on a formula of power-sharing in August 2019. A civilian cabinet administrated the country for the following two years, while a Sovereign Council led by the two generals was the endorsing authority. Disagreements among civilian and military stakeholders were numerous, despite genuine attempts to erase parts of the international debt and normalize relations with prominent donors.

The RSF and SAF coup in October 2021 and the war that broke out in April 2023 between these two armed bodies are the consequence of an incomplete victory of the popular resistance movement (that had to accept a power-sharing agreement with the SAF and RSF), divisions among civilian forces, and growing competition between the two de facto armies on the nature of the regime that should eventually be shaped through the tumultuous transition. Although it would be easy to describe the current war in Sudan as a fight for life between two generals, other internal actors play an essential role and affect its political and military trajectories. Among them, one should count the Islamists and other remnants of the former regime and the armed groups based in the so-called peripheries that tactically have often played the SAF against the RSF to gain a better position in their region or nationally.

The Juba Peace Agreement signed in October 2020 between rebel groups and the civilian government may have been more a response to donors' concerns than a genuine attempt to give the population of the peripheries a say in the new regime. The confrontation between RSF and SAF that started in April 2023 is tearing apart the country's social fabric, much beyond the war zones. The RSF is fundamentally an organization that recruited massively among Arab tribes in Darfur. However, one should read this ethnic identification carefully and avoid considering it the main driving force in the current battles. Other aspects, including Hemedti's political ambitions, have to be considered. In the same way, one should look carefully at the SAF, the sociological transformations undertaken under Omar Al Bashir's rule, and its alleged military expertise.

The killing of Chadian President Idriss Déby Itno in April 2021 challenged the foundations of the highly personalized regime that had existed in Chad for 30 years. After hours of confusion, one of his sons, Mahamat "Kaka" (meaning that his grandmother educated him), took over the presidency and led a transition that general elections should conclude by October 2024. Although the transitional regime shows an apparent continuity with the past, Chadian politics is evolving fast. Nevertheless, critics may rightly point out that its authoritarian nature and the Zaghawa identity of its leadership have not been challenged through a transition that was choreographed with France and the USA. The new president took several initiatives intended to show a reformist trend: diaspora opponents were invited to settle back in Chad and opposition politicians got positions in the new regime.

The evolution of the power base, or hegemonic bloc, has been a fascinating question from the beginning of the regime. Idriss Déby was more than a warlord and tried to build a larger

constituency than the communities of those who fought alongside him against the leader he succeeded, Hissène Habré. In a nutshell, at least militarily speaking, Idriss Déby built a coalition of Zaghawa, Arabs, Tubus, and Goranes that stayed



Arab Nomad Caravan in Northern Chad, Photo by David Stanley

over his presidential terms. On the civilian side, he extended this bloc by tactically rallying additional “Southern” groups. Of course, those groups and the politicians who represented them never had the same relevance for his rule. When oil revenues grew after 2003, he increasingly lost many communities that were not prominent in his military and security apparatus. Until 2010, most revenues were spent to consolidate his support among Zaghawa and buy military equipment to erase his armed opposition. After 2010, Idriss Déby felt he had won the war and did not need to build the coalition he had led in the 1990s again. He also had to manage and contain internal disputes between the Zaghawa community and his wife Hinda’s clientele on how the oil money was allocated. However, he kept the support of influential notables originating from those regions.

After April 2021, the most significant change is the evolution of the power base of the current president, which allocates more room to other groups that have been part of the hegemonic bloc, though in a secondary position, such as Goranes. This new dynamic has implications for how Zaghawa and Arabs in Chad look at the internal and regional situations and search for allies.

The war in Sudan that started in Khartoum but reached Darfur in the following weeks had a nearly immediate impact on the border as many civilians crossed it to Chad, fearing bloody confrontations. This humanitarian dimension has become more critical with time since skirmishes and battles pushed tens of thousands of civilians to seek shelter in Chad. Moreover, military developments in Darfur generated either a reluctant or enthusiastic identification with major Sudanese military players in sections of the Chadian population. The Zaghawa community at large and large sections of the military and security apparatus showed increasing concern about the consequences this fighting could have on their kin in Darfur. Chadian Arabs, often divided in the internal political arena, felt more sympathy for the RSF, and increasingly, many who lived in Eastern Chad moved to seek employment in the Hemedti empire, which implies, in most cases, being recruited into his army.

The following sections try to outline Chadian politics since the death of Idriss Déby and how the new regime assesses the war in Sudan and Darfur. As always, these perceptions are guided by local stakes and incentives provided by external actors. Often, there is a discrepancy between the rationality of internal alliances and international alignments. The challenges for regime survival lie in those differences.

The old/new regional configuration: The 2020s are not the 2000s

As the number of refugees increases in Eastern Chad, there is a trend in analyses that look at the current situation with the glasses used 20 years ago. People start discussing proxy war and the likelihood of an armed conflict within Chad. Nothing is impossible, but one should first clear serious misunderstandings in history. Today's situation is not homeomorphic to what happened in the early 2000s, either internally or regionally.

When the Darfur conflict broke out in the early 2000s, the situation in Chad and Sudan was different. In a nutshell, Omar Al Bashir was getting the benefits of normalization with the USA and the Gulf states: Hassan Turabi was out from December 1999 and imprisoned in February 2001; meanwhile, reconciliation with Saudi Arabia and cooperation with the US security agencies took off in 2000. It was not a honeymoon but represented a net improvement. Oil revenues gave Khartoum a sense of new prosperity after more than a decade of shortages. The negotiation with the SPLM/A of John Garang took off in June 2002 in an atmosphere when Bashir's regime thought it was on the winning side, which explains why the first months of talks in Naivasha were so hard and why, eventually, its main negotiator was changed.

When the Darfur conflict broke out, it was interpreted in Khartoum as an attempt by the SPLA and its Darfuri allies to pressure the negotiation terms in Kenya. The reaction was harsh and followed patterns already enforced in the case of South Sudan: the recourse to local militias and the use of absolute brutality to coerce populations that were identified as potentially hostile. The state apparatus was uninterested in addressing local grievances and regaining popular support. Zurga (non-Arab) tribes were the enemy that needed to be crushed, and the SAF Military Intelligence knew how to exacerbate conflicts and militarize them. The regime was strong in Khartoum and unwilling to compromise beyond its talks with the SPLA. The war varied in intensity over the following years but never stopped, even after Qatar got involved in a long and meaningless mediation that delivered the still-born Doha Document for Peace in Darfur. The Border Guard Forces and the RSF are the heirs of that history. They bear the responsibility for the mass killings; the deep involvement of the SAF (and even at a personal level of General Burhan) is often forgotten by outsiders. Darfur rebel groups survived essentially because South Sudan or Libya contracted them as surrogate forces in their internal wars.

Chad was in a different moment. Presidential elections were so obviously rigged in 2001 that President Idriss Déby first announced that he would not stand for reelection for the following presidential term starting in 2006 (the constitution did not allow this to happen) and would prepare the transition to a more civilian regime. However, Idriss Déby announced that he had changed his mind at his party's national congress in October 2003, a few months after oil exploitation had started. He changed the constitution in 2004 to cancel the limitation of the number of presidential terms. This decision divided his supporters, and some of his closest

allies in his community tried to overthrow him in 2005 and, after failing, escaped to Darfur to organize a rebellion against him.

The first group was called, humorously, SCUD (*Socle pour le Changement, l'Unité et la Démocratie*) and was led by Yaya Dillo Djérou, who went back to N'djamena in 2006, worked some years in Déby's cabinet before reverting to the opposition. Dillo was killed on February 28, 2024, because he tried to mobilize his supporters in the security apparatus and create the same situation as in 2006. He failed dramatically: lessons had been learned in the presidency. In 2006, sections of the Presidential Guard left their barracks in N'djamena with heavy weapons and joined the opposition in Darfur. It took years for Idriss Déby to regain complete control thanks to French, European, and US official and unofficial support. The expedient closure of the *Mission des Nations Unies en République Centrafricaine et au Tchad* (MINURCAT) in December 2010 was one of the many signals that Idriss Déby had defeated his opposition.

What happened from 2003 onwards between Chad and Sudan was more than a proxy war. The conflict in Darfur had deeper roots among the Zaghawa community. It split it as it polarized other Chadian groups allied to Idriss Déby over the years. Some of his closest relatives had family connections with Sudanese Zaghawa rebel leaders. Moreover, Sudanese Zaghawa, who had helped Idriss Déby take over in December 1990 and had become a significant part of the Chadian military and security apparatus, decided to help their kin on the other side of the border despite the neutrality claimed by the Chadian president. Omar Al Bashir, who had warm relations with Idriss Déby, could not believe him anymore when some of the latter's brothers and cousins were providing shelter, money, fuel, and weapons to rebels in Darfur. Salah Abdallah Gosh, the then-influential head of the Sudanese intelligence, orchestrated the riposte. The conditions for a total war were met.

It took two attempts to overthrow Idriss Déby in April 2006 and February 2008 by Darfur-based Chadian rebels (supported by Sudan) and an attack on Omdurman in May 2008 by the rebel Justice and Equality Movement (JEM, that benefited from Chadian and Libyan support) to push the two heads of state to get back to a deal. By January 2010, the Darfuri rebel groups no longer benefited from the same backing, while most of the Chadian opposition fighters in Darfur were disarmed, except those who joined the Border Guard Forces led by Musa Hilal and Hemedti. Khalid Ibrahim, the JEM chairman, was killed in December 2011 by an SAF air strike. There were allegations that the operation was organized thanks to Chadian intelligence.

Today, the situation is radically different. Although there are divisions among Zaghawa, they have yet to reach such an intensity that they could translate into the establishment of armed opposition groups - without here discussing the attitude of the Sudan stakeholders on such a project. Chadian communities that got into the fray in the 2000s, such as Arabs and small Waddai groups, did so because they expected a more significant share of power by joining the Zaghawa opposition to Déby. Today, they have no such choice. They may cross the border, but their aim is more personal than political, at least for now. As analyzed in the next section, Chadian politics may still lean towards confrontation, but the reasons, for now, are internal. Transnational politics still play an important role but in a different context. Paradoxically, the only group that might today be willing to launch a rebellion is from the South and would need



MSF workers assess Darfuri refugees newly arrived in Adre, photo by John Vianney Bissakonou, MSF

a sanctuary in the Central African Republic (CAR). Mahamat Kaka decided on “rapprochement” with Bangui and a trip to Russia to preempt the possibility of such insurgency.

Sudanese Zaghawa rebel groups, until April 2023, had experienced military adventures in Libya and South Sudan and considered Chad a safe haven for them and their families, but not a rear base. Connections are still there, but no one among their leaders thought that

war could restart in Darfur after the signature of the Juba Peace Agreement. All eyes were turned to Khartoum and the allocation of positions there. Therefore, until April 2023, or even months after, Chad was not seen as a prominent actor by political stakeholders in Sudan.

However, Chadian observers insist that support for Zaghawa rebels has not stopped over the last years but has taken different forms, either humanitarian or logistical. This situation suited the SAF well since Hemedti's ambitions were becoming more tangible. The RSF and Hemedti developed good relations with N'djamena for other reasons. The Border Guard Forces became the most influential institution to integrate Chadian rebels and control them by offering a new livelihood. Musa Hilal, whose mother is Zaghawa, also married one of his daughters to Idriss Déby in January 2012. Although the marriage did not last, it was understood as a way to reconcile Zaghawa and Rizeigat across the border. This connection survived the RSF's creation in 2013 and Musa Hilal's humiliating arrest by the RSF in 2017. Hemedti promised Déby he would keep the former rebels in check and integrate possible troublemakers. Money brought fluidity to the agreement as Hemedti also had some businesses in Chad, allegedly in gold and transportation. Both RSF and SAF leaders did everything to keep good relations with Mahamat Kaka at each other's expense since each went to N'djamena to complain about the undue ambitions of his rival and likely dire consequences on Chad. These trips did not move the Chadian leadership, which had its own understanding of Sudanese politics and did not want to get involved much. One may guess that what was at stake was related to the French attitude in front of Sudanese actors. Of course, one should revisit this question at a time when significant military developments are taking place in Darfur.

One should add a sociological argument to this short historical overview. Sudanese Zaghawa fought alongside Idriss Déby after his failed coup and escaped to Darfur in 1989 to set up a new rebellion supported by Libya. Many are today high or mid-rank officials in the military and the security apparatus. To use an Ibn Khaldun comparison, they are settled, urbanized, and bourgeois today. Although they still have family relations on the other side of the border, they know what they have accumulated over the years and may be reluctant to put their assets at

risk by joining a new war in Sudan. Chadian Zaghawa (called Bideyat or Beri) are primarily concerned with safeguarding their privileges in Chad and, in the absence of major internal contradictions, may likely try not to get too involved in Darfur politics, especially if this might trigger a conflict inside Chad. At least, this is a consideration often heard in N'djamena among people close to the presidency.

Chad politics and the Sudanese crisis

Chad's politics changed dramatically after the death of Idriss Déby Itno in April 2021. One of his sons, Mahamat Kaka, took over after the speaker of the parliament declined for health reasons, despite the constitution. Opponents called it a coup. Mahamat Kaka was the head of the *Direction Générale des Services de Sécurité des Institutions de l'Etat* (DGSSIE, the former Presidential Guard) before the death of his father.

It may not be helpful here to go into all the intricacies of the transitional regime, but a few points should be mentioned to shed light on significant changes. The transitional authorities had to cope with international conditionalities and made some critical moves in response. The new president opened up to the old opposition, and the two prime ministers since April 2021 had long opposed Idriss Déby's rule. Dissenters outside the country were called back home and offered official positions. A dialogue with armed opposition groups was conducted in Doha thanks to Qatari hospitality and funding. Another dialogue, reminiscent of the *Conférence Nationale* held in 1993, occurred in 2022 in N'djamena. These were ambiguous moments, but the population appreciated that, for once, its grievances were publicly discussed, if not solved.

Meanwhile, substantial changes were made within the security apparatus, although they hardly affected the communal nature of power and the clients of the regime. Leading officers were eventually pensioned, and others were transferred to less powerful positions, while younger or junior officers were promoted. The result of all these musical chairs is that nothing has changed, except that those in charge are closer to Mahamat Kaka than they were to his father. The changes affect the role of the different arms of the military and the numerical balance between the core groups that have been the pillars of Idriss Déby's rule.

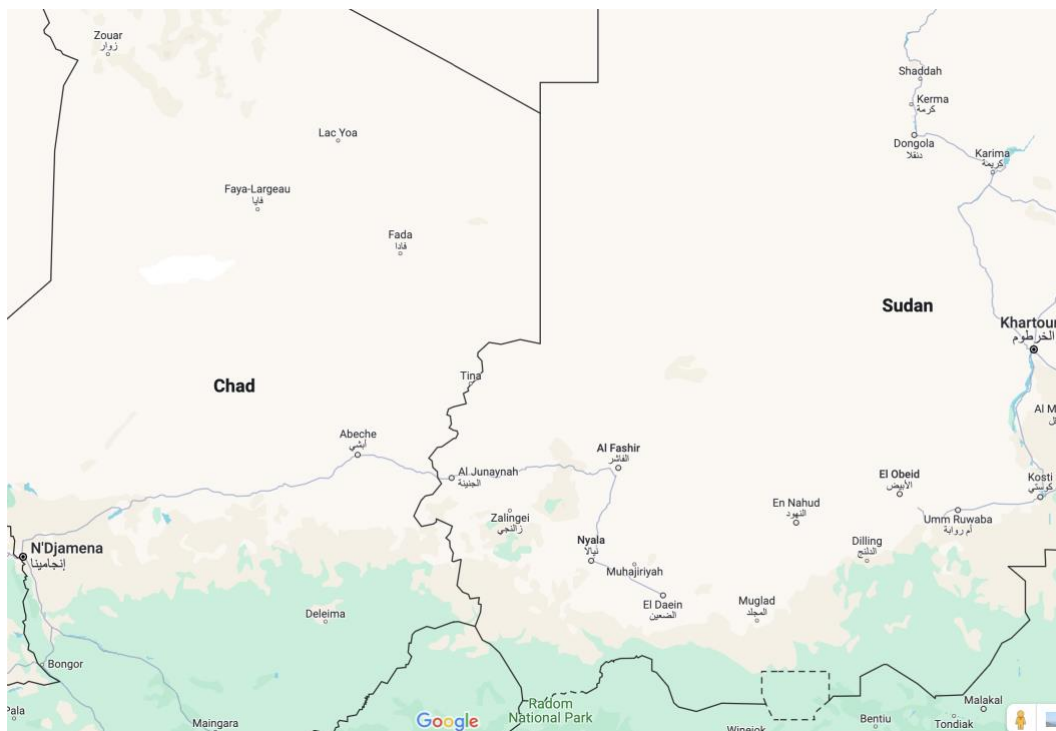
For instance, the *Garde nationale nomade* is nowadays under Gorane control, and its duties include the security of the capital city. The DGSSIE is still the most potent contingent, but its *groupements* (field companies) receive different treatments and mandates. The *Armée nationale tchadienne* (ANT) is the most important armed body numerically, but observers question its equipment and its performance. Demographically, three groups are the most relevant: Zaghawa, Gorane, and Arab.

While Arab figures lead two critical ministries, Arab intellectuals often claim that these two officials have little influence, being technocrats more than politicians and, therefore, disconnected from the Arab masses. These observers also say that Arab officers are not well represented at the decision-making level in the security apparatus. A point that is hardly mentioned is that politically, there is no one Arab community, only Arab communities. Other groups play well in this lack of political consensus. This grievance has been mentioned for a long time in Chadian politics and is based on demography more than politics. As far as census figures have a sense, Arabs may represent between 13 and 25 % of the population, the Gorane more than 6 %, and the Zaghawa maybe 3 to 5 %.

Gorane is the group-in-law of President Mahamat Kaka and has benefitted from his time in power. There are two ways to look at this situation. One is to assess changes in positions, appointments, and mandates. What is attempted is to find a new balance that may strengthen the alliance within the regime if Zaghawa officers are not too jealous. Another viewpoint is to look deeply at the personal history of some leading figures and consider, as observers underline it in N'djamena, that this change is more a weakening of Zaghawa than a strengthening of the Gorane. This is the perception of many Zaghawa in the capital city, a frequently discussed point of discontent.

Zaghawa is a large community where the sense of tribal solidarity is not automatic. Therefore, one should be careful because clan or personal issues may unify or split people of this community, while it would not happen the same way in other ethnic groups. To understand this better, one should differentiate between Sudanese Zaghawa and Chadian Zaghawa (Bideyat) and associated groups (Kobe and others). One should also look at the debate within the Itno family over the succession.

In a nutshell, all Sudanese Zaghawa consider Chad their safe haven and could unite to protect it. The Chadian Zaghawa have a long history of divisions, reconciliations, and rivalries. Their problem is whether they could extend their rule despite their demographic status or open up to more fundamental changes under the conditions that there would not be any retribution. One should not downplay the diversity of views and the fear their minority status creates. The Itno family has further boiling issues to tackle, as always. Two are relevant in the current situation because they have echoes in the larger Zaghawa communities. One deals with responsibility for the death of Idriss Déby. Many stories are told in N'djamena that incriminate different actors. This question is often used to weaken Mahamat Kaka since he was also in Kanem with his father, fighting the rebels of FACT (*Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad*). Another



Chad – Sudan border, Source: Google maps

debate is whether the current president is the sole and best candidate to lead the country in the next election. Many ambitions exist among brothers and cousins, and there is a long list of grievances and allegations that any observers could hear from them.

One crucial implication of this sketchy description is that the presidency needs money to ease tensions, convince people to step down without major annoyances, or rally possible dissenters. Moreover, newcomers at all levels are eager to cash in their new positions, and one may guess that corruption is more than a creeping reality.

In society, the picture is radically different. Southerners, who are nearly the majority of the population, are certainly the most frustrated, disappointed people. They had thought the end of Idriss Déby would be the end of the Zaghawa regime, and did not anticipate that the regime would reform itself to last. This view, again, is not unanimous. Some Southern Chadian politicians had worked with Idriss Déby, and others, such as the first prime minister of the transition, joined the regime after his death. Attempts to create armed groups based in the CAR failed as Chadian forces were allowed to penetrate deep inside the country and destroy their camps. Moreover, those rebels appeared numerous but were poorly armed and had no political cadres. The CAR president stated several times that his country would not host rebellions against N'djamena as he knows that Chad could do the same again, with a high probability of changing the Bangui regime.

Let us focus on Eastern Chad, where disappointment has been less important, even though people feel that their chance to get greater access to the state (and its resources) has dissolved and access remains minimal. Their behavior is based on three different parameters that may explain the difference in their political and social attitude.

First, despite some official commitments at the beginning of the transition, the state presence in areas populated by Arabs and Waddai people has not grown convincingly, which was also reflected in the lack of facilities when Sudanese refugees crossed the border to Adré and tried to settle in more hospitable places. The Chadian state seems uninterested despite French, European Union, and US promises to fund projects. There is not much except the presence of the security and military apparatus and the facilities set up by donors to respond to the dramatic inflows of refugees since the early 2000s.

Second, there is an issue in their political representation. Some of their potential leaders, such as former minister of State Abakar Mannany or Ambassador Ahmat Hassaballah Soubiane, have left the political arena (for very different reasons), and no one seems willing or able to replace them. Others, such as the current minister of foreign affairs, are respected but are considered wise men in the cabinet more than community leaders. This weak political representation may produce contradictory effects: depoliticization, radicalization, or exit options.

Thirdly, Chadian Arabs unhappy with their situation in their country watch Sudan and Hemedti. In their lackluster universe of deprivation, the trajectory of Hemedti looks like a miracle: the camel herder who is nowadays a billionaire! Hemedti is not perceived first as a warlord but as a successful entrepreneur, a self-made man who has consistently helped his community and offered jobs, services, and a future. Seen from Chad, the conflict in Darfur does not look the same way the Sudanese diaspora explains it to Westerners. In their view, Arabs in Darfur are fighting for their honor against the Massalit, who executed some of their leaders. The narrative

does not mention the Sudanese state, land management, and the long-suffering of all. It is rather described as a feud that requires a victory.

Mahariyya, Rizeigat, and other Arabs joined the fray individually, then in dozens, and by the end of 2023, in hundreds. The RSF was on a winning trajectory, and plundering was a great reward. To be more explicit, the RSF was not recruiting them; they went to RSF and requested integration. Their involvement in Sudan, in Darfur, and beyond is an open secret in N'djamena, and the regime is not so interested in stopping it. One reason is that most observers in Chad believe that those who leave to fight with Hemedti will stay with him and settle in Sudan, where their future likely looks brighter than in Chad.

Two points need to be kept in mind. First, when in this text the term Arab is used, it refers to several Arab tribes and also to Waddai groups who share the same land and livelihood as these Arab tribes: Dadjo, Kibet, and Tama share the same regional identity and the same ambivalent feeling toward the Chadian state. Second, while most of those joining the RSF have no political agenda, some believe that once Hemedti wins in Sudan, he will help them change the regime in Chad or at least not oppose the presence of Chadian armed groups in Darfur. This assumption sounds like wishful thinking. If Hemedti wins, he will need even more recruits to consolidate his power. If he loses, people may stay in Darfur in large numbers as the new power in Khartoum will be busy trying to rebuild its capital city and economy.

Islamist and SAF propaganda depicts the RSF as an army of invaders of Diaspora Arabs of the Sahel region, seeking to settle in lands from which they evicted the original inhabitants, as has happened in West Darfur. Darfur rebel groups state openly that 30% of RSF forces originate from Chad. Some even mention Niger. This SAF allegation, in its essence, may not be baseless. Nevertheless, one should be careful about at least two reasons. One is that the Border Guard Forces/RSF integrated many Chadians from rebel armed groups with the endorsement of SAF, Omar Al Bashir, and Idriss Déby. Their integration into para-military bodies meant that they would be recognized as Sudanese. Moreover, those joining the RSF are, in the great majority, from the border area, and it may not be easy to determine their legal citizenship: they may fulfill the conditions to be either Chadian or Sudanese.

This description tries to present the local arguments, whether politically correct or not. However, one should be cautious enough to recognize that external dynamics played a very negative role in consolidating tendencies for more antagonistic attitudes on all sides, as described below.

Gulf states and regional stakes of the war as seen from chairs

In a very divided region, all regimes share one priority: democracy is not acceptable. Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Libya, and the Gulf states consider that a Sudanese democracy would sooner or later constitute a threat to their national security because their regimes are coping with opposition that would be strengthened by the very existence of a democracy in the region or because their model of leadership is that of a strong man who does not care about constitutional limitations.

Chad is no exception to this distrust of democracy and had no problem endorsing the new regime after August 2019 or October 2021. A military regime as a neighbor comforts the legitimacy of a praetorian regime at home. General Burhan attended Idriss Déby's funeral. Soon after, Hemedti was in N'djamena to give his condolences. Both went there to acknowledge Idriss Déby's role in convincing Darfur rebel groups to enter into the negotiations that concluded with the Juba Peace Agreement.

Soon, the question became how to balance relations between the two Sudanese leaders as Chad's new president got contradictory advice from his allies. Marshal Abdel Fattah Sissi was a committed supporter of his homolog Burhan and had little consideration for Hemedti. He and Burhan attended the same Chief of Staff training and developed a friendship. More importantly, Egyptian military firms had interests in Sudanese military companies and vice-versa. Both shared the same distrust of civilians. They saw themselves as a caste, and Hemedti, the camel-herder/militiaman, was not welcome. Egypt's relevance in Chadian politics increased when it released a leading opponent, Tom Erdimi, for the Doha dialogue (April-August 2022). Tom's brother, Timane Erdimi, was the mastermind of the rebellion against Idriss Déby after 2006 and was in exile in Doha from 2010 until 2022. Cairo made its case in favor of Burhan several times and was even more assertive after the war broke out in Khartoum in April 2023.

Nevertheless, Hemedti was brighter than expected. He was welcome in Niger, and President Bazoum was campaigning for him in N'djamena. Furthermore, Hemedti was a Darfuri and a super-wealthy entrepreneur. This detail was never lost in N'djamena, where the need for fresh money has been part of the regime's DNA since December 1990. Hemedti was also a strategic ally in keeping peace at the border since his forces prohibited any rebel group from getting sanctuary there. This ability has made Hemedti a significant player in the regime's stability.

An illustration of this quality is the attitude of Yaya Dillo's brother, Ousmane, after the killing of his brother in N'djamena on February 28, 2024. Ousmane had left Chad to fight alongside Minawi. When he heard the news about the death of his brother, he made a threatening statement against the regime in N'djamena, calling for justice and the punishment of his brother's killers. After 48 hours, his tone changed, and he called for prayer for his brother. Many Chadian analysts are convinced that (a lot of) money changed or will change hands, and Hemedti played or will play his part as he needs Mahamat Kaka and could not afford a Zaghawa rebellion in Darfur for his relations with N'djamena and with Western countries allied with Mahamat Kaka.

This explains why Chad was adamant about claiming its neutrality at the beginning of the war. It stands to lose on both sides, and a cease-fire was expected within a few weeks. In that period, to balance its interests on both sides, informally, Chadian officials hoped there would be no winner and no loser: this stance had the advantage of not antagonizing Cairo or Hemedti and keeping a balance between the main stakeholders in Sudan. Chad like many analysts (including this author) was wrong: the war did not stop but intensified and reached new locations, including Darfur, Kordofan, and Gezira State in central Sudan.

Then, the assessment changed and was dominated by damages control and cost/benefit arguments. While in the first weeks of the war, N'djamena insisted that it did not want to get involved at any cost, in early summer, the narrative changed, though it never appeared as such in the news. In the new narrative, Hemedti should not lose the war because the former Chadian rebels who had integrated the RSF would return to Chad with their weapons, bitterness, and

ambitions. Darfur rebel groups advocated against Hemedti as they foresaw the fighting dynamics and knew that Darfur would become a hotbed sooner rather than later. The regime developed a new justification. For years, Darfur rebel groups got Chadian support and could benefit informally from many advantages. In order to balance this, N'djamena was willing to support Hemedti and keep him as one of the two key players in the war.

The trip of Mahamat Kaka and his closest advisers (and not his minister of foreign affairs) to UAE in June 2023 was crucial in modeling the new policy with a more confusing definition of neutrality. Abu Dhabi promised Mahamat Kaka a loan of \$ 1.5 billion (Chad's annual budget is \$ 1.8 billion) and



Darfuri refugees in Chad, photo by Jehanne Henry

military vehicles delivered in August 2023. It was a very favorable agreement for a regime that was chronically short of cash and needed to bribe many officers and politicians before a decisive presidential election. Later, some raised doubts about its implications on intra-Zaghawa debates if Darfur's security deteriorates. The building of a hospital in Amdjaress, near the border, was used as a motive for flying all kinds of equipment from UAE to Chad through Uganda, and a significant part was then moved to major RSF bases in Darfur by trucks.

To understand Abu Dhabi's strategy, it is necessary to go back to the Gulf policy towards Sudan since UAE support for Hemedti is based on, in part, on the rivalry with Riyadh, also on the hostility towards an Islamist regime in Khartoum and the preference for a strong man, which general Burhan has never been. Over time, the importance of these issues, one related to the other, has evolved, but they provide a good framework for understanding the UAE's behavior.

Bashir was never trusted by Gulf states, even when he took the drastic decision to cut relations with Iran in 2014 and get involved in Yemen in 2015: Khartoum was always playing the rivalries between Turkey and Qatar on one side, and Riyadh and Abu Dhabi on the other. In 2018 and 2019, Saudi Arabia and UAE chose not to extend any support to Bashir, whom they viewed as an unreliable partner. To make matters worse for Bashir, the UAE halted fuel shipments to Sudan in December 2018, which may have hastened the end of his rule.

Gulf donors then tried to shape Sudan's political transition and cement their influence. Saudi Arabia and UAE agreed to send \$ 3 billion worth of aid, including \$ 500 million in Central Bank deposits (only part of this pledge was fulfilled). They also helped when Khartoum negotiated a major debt relief package with the Paris Club in the spring of 2021. Their financial support

played a crucial role in reinforcing the hand of the military factions. Many observers believe that Gulf support emboldened the military factions and made them less inclined to grant concessions to civilians. The UAE channeled parts of its support through Hemedti, which allowed him to become the head of the Emergency Economic Committee.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE issued joint statements condemning the coup in October 2021 and supporting the UN mediation. Despite making vague pledges of support, Gulf donors have turned down Burhan's requests for assistance and debt relief and have not disbursed substantial aid to Sudan. While the connection between Abu Dhabi and Hemedti has deepened over the last nine years, thanks to RSF's active involvement in the Yemen war (nothing comparable to the SAF troops sent there), it is still difficult to grasp the strategic motivations behind the current support to Hemedti that developed from June 2023 and offered him life insurance much better than the military acquisitions from southern Libya and allegedly from the Central African Republic.

The Jeddah mediation process was poorly planned by its initiators. One reason was that it exposed Riyadh's ambition to appear as the regional hegemon in a situation where it had little control over the main stakeholders. Saudi Arabian diplomacy is more open and flexible but much less transactional than the UAE's attitude towards Burhan and Hemedti. In the long term, Riyadh may prevail because it can talk to everyone, but its behavior creates more challenges in the short term of a war. This mediation took off when the warm relations between the two Gulf countries evaporated in a quest for regional economic leadership. UAE, which had leverage on several actors, beyond Hemedti in Sudan, felt sidelined and decided not to be helpful.

Moreover, the UAE, more than Saudi Arabia, does not want the Inqaz regime and its Islamist backbone back. This return would appear as an actual defeat for the containment policy that was put in place after the Arab Spring. Hemedti offers a guarantee against this comeback. There is also a political paradigm that Abu Dhabi enjoyed and explained its support for Abiy Ahmed, or even Issayas at one point: the strongman, the enlightened dictator who supports economic liberalization (that is beneficial to UAE) and authoritarian rule (that keeps at bay Islamists and democrats). Hemedti could fit the model again, especially if he keeps listening to some of his advisers. Last but not least, Hemedti is a crucial economic operative in regional strategic markets (gold, food production) and could open new gates for the Emiratis. One point for further thought is the regional apprehension by the Emiratis: today, they entertain clients in Libya, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. However, what advantages they could create through these multiple alliances is still unclear.

Unsurprisingly, there is yet to be a UAE assessment of the human cost of this policy. This parameter is addressed only when powerful external powers, such as the USA, China, and the European Union, raise their concerns and start onerous sanctions regimes. However, despite all statements, this is still not the case.

Conclusion

This description needs to be completed. The political dynamics in Chad are fluid, and the recent elimination of a leading opponent within the ruling family expresses the radical means used to regulate politics and the inherent fragility of praetorian rule. UAE's stance on Sudan and Chad

is not static, though one can hardly bet on a resolution like the one discussed in Manana. The US tragically cultivates procrastination and multiplies moral statements more than political acts.

Two international actors have not been mentioned despite their likely influence on some policies. One is Russia through Wagner, and the other is France. Both are not easily readable, mainly because conspiracy theories have been developed so frequently that facts and fiction are difficult to disentangle.

At the risk of being wrong and controversial, one can pretend that the French role is not permanent, or has been discontinued. Paris was an essential player in the debt-relief deal reached in July 2021 after a large gathering in Paris two months earlier but was nearly voiceless after the coup in October 2021. Observers tend to believe France is reproducing a policy already witnessed in Libya. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintains a decent or warm relationship with the SAF/Sudanese government, while the *Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure* (DGSE, French Secret Services) works with Hemedti. The justification is to contribute to the stability of Chad and keep some options open in Libya, where the DGSE developed working relations with General Haftar. The fragility of this policy is that its cost may be high if Darfur is discussed, and the relationship between Paris and N'djamena is not as close as French politicians and high-ranking military officers believe.

Russia was often quoted in the US press as being mobilized behind Hemedti. In particular, Wagner was described as a strategic ally providing sophisticated weapons systems to Hemedti from the Central African Republic and Libya. This support might be genuine. However, the author believes it is mostly propaganda, except for a short period in spring 2023. One should wonder why Russia would play against Iran in Sudan. At the end of the day, Russia wants a naval base on the Red Sea, and only the winner can give it. No one knows for sure who is going to win this senseless war. All know that the population has already lost.