

**REPORT**

# **THE SUDANESE ARMY AND THE RAPID SUPPORT FORCES: YESTERDAY'S UNEASY FRIENDS, TODAY'S BITTER ENEMIES**

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In a surprising development, fierce armed clashes involving heavy weapons erupted in Sudan's capital Khartoum and other Sudanese cities between the Sudanese army led by General Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan —who is also the head of the country's Transitional Sovereignty Council — and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by his deputy Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti). Several civilians and military personnel have been killed or injured. According to the Sudanese army, the armed clashes are the consequence of the RSF's attempt to seize control of many critical sites in the capital and other parts of the country. Meanwhile, the RSF said that the army had launched strikes on its camps and outposts in the capital's southern outskirts, employing both light and heavy weapons. This armed escalation between the army and RSF follows previous disputes between the two parties concerning the processes and phases needed to integrate the RSF into the army.

This report sheds light on the underlying causes and nature of the divisions between the army and the RSF that are driving this dangerous escalation as well as its impact on the country's development, security and stability. It also highlights the implications of the RSF's escalation and rejection of the process of integration proposed by the army as well as the impacts of the ongoing power struggle between the two military apparatuses on Sudan's domestic landscape.

### **What Triggered the Dispute Between the Army and the RSF?**

The differences between the Sudanese army and RSF emerged after the latter's integration into the military set-up was raised. In June 2021, the RSF commander said that the talk about integrating the paramilitary force into the regular army could lead to the disintegration of Sudan. On October 25, 2021, Lieutenant General Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan announced a package of emergency measures including the dissolution of the country's Transitional Sovereignty Council and the cabinet and the announcement of a state of emergency. The move was viewed by some political forces as a military coup. In August 2022, the differences between Burhan and Hemedti escalated, with the latter announcing that the former's aforementioned measures, had failed and that Sudan's situation had deteriorated further. He then called for the implementation of the framework agreement, handing over power to civilians and holding off attacks on protesters. He also

expressed regret for participating in the October 25 measures, which he described as a coup.

In December 2022, after the signing of the framework agreement which laid the foundations for the transitional period, and the process for the army to abandon politics and hand over power to civilians, differences strongly resurfaced between the two sides over the RSF's integration into the regular army. This was clearly evident in the army representatives' withdrawal from the security and military overhaul workshop in March 2023. The withdrawal came as the workshop's recommendations did not include any timeframe for the RSF's integration process.

According to the timeframe agreed upon by Sudan's political forces and the military, a new civilian government was supposed to be formed to fill the political vacuum that the country had been experiencing since Burhan's measures on October 25, 2021, whereby he dissolved Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok's cabinet. However, the differences between the Sudanese army and RSF were the primary reason behind postponing the signing of a final agreement between the political forces, which was scheduled to take place in early April. The following casts light on the major differences in relation to the RSF's integration into the regular army:

- 1- The Sudanese army demanded that the process of integration should take no more than six months while the RSF said that the integration process would take more than a decade.
- 2- The second contention was regarding the RSF officers' ranks. The army wants the military ranks to be reviewed post-integration whereas, the RSF insists that the ranks should remain unchanged.
- 3- The Sudanese army called on the RSF to halt its recruitment drive since it recruits the bulk of its new soldiers from its camps across the country which the army vehemently opposes.
- 4- The escalation of differences between Burhan and Hemedti included a critical disagreement over who would be the army's commander-in-chief during the integration period. The RSF called on the country's civilian president to become the commander-in-chief, which the army rejected.

In recent days, because of back-and-forth remarks, tensions between the Sudanese army and RSF have been rising. The security unrest between the two sides has reached unprecedented proportions, with the RSF moving more than 100 vehicles loaded with soldiers and weapons to Marwa Airport in northern Sudan, a crucial airport that aids Khartoum Airport during emergencies. It is home to an air base that supports Khartoum's military airport. The deployment occurred without the knowledge or coordination with Sudan's military commanders. Furthermore, the RSF began deployment and mobilization in the capital and numerous other Sudanese cities, raising fears of conflict between the two military apparatuses. On April 14, 2023, the army warned of a potential confrontation between its forces and the RSF due to Hemedti's refusal to withdraw his troops from Marwa Airport.

### **How Has the RSF Commander Consolidated His Power Over Sudan?**

The RSF, whose troops are estimated to be over 100,000, was formed under the former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir to assist in cracking down on rebels in Darfur. In 2013, the RSF became a paramilitary force connected to the Sudanese National Security Service. In 2017, Bashir decided to give the RSF a more formal status. Legislation was enacted to regulate the RSF, making it answerable to the Sudanese army rather than to the country's intelligence service. However, when Hemedti was ordered to suppress the protests against Bashir's government during the popular uprising that erupted in 2018, the RSF commander resisted, siding instead with the protestors. Under pressure from Sudanese protestors and sit-ins at the Sudanese army's command headquarters, the RSF helped to depose Bashir in April 2019. Hemedti made an agreement in the same year that allowed him to become vice president of the ruling Transitional Sovereignty Council, which was headed by Lieutenant General Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan.

The RSF's siding with the revolution and involvement in ousting Bashir's government earned it and its commander, Hemedti, popular appeal among the Sudanese people. However, public trust quickly evaporated and tensions soared after accusations that the RSF participated in the dispersal of the sit-in held in front of the army's command headquarters, in which many civilians were killed. The

gap widened between Hemedti and the Sudanese people after the former played a role in the measures taken by Burhan, which deposed Hamdok's cabinet on October 25, 2021.

### **Significations of the RSF's Escalation and Rejection of Integration Into the Sudanese Army**

The recent RSF moves, notably the seizure of Marwa Airport, were done to put pressure on the Sudanese army and force it to satisfy its demands such as extending the period of integration. Hemedti's move also intended to end the army's control of Marwa Airport because the armaments stationed there could give the Sudanese army a clear advantage over the RSF.

In addition, for Hemedti and other RSF commanders, the integration of the paramilitary force into the Sudanese army would mean the loss of political and economic achievements made since removing Bashir and his government. If the integration occurred, Hemedti in particular, would face grave consequences such as possibly retiring because of a lack of military qualifications to allow him to keep his current military rank. He could also face trial on accusations of human rights violations in Darfur and involvement in breaking up the sit-in held at the army command's headquarters in 2019.

Hemedti has recently taken several steps to secure his political career in Sudan. He has forged alliances with Sudanese parties and political leaders, in addition, he has also attempted to move closer to the revolutionaries through embracing their slogans. Hemedti has strong connections with regional actors and has accumulated significant wealth as a result of his extensive military clout and control over the gold mines in Darfur. He has established several companies that have allowed him to increase his wealth and preserve the huge economic gains he has made over the past few years.

### **Potential Outcomes and Repercussions of the Crisis**

The ongoing conflict between the Sudanese army and RSF may cause further delays in the signing of the framework agreement, potentially risking the country's political transition and advancement of democracy. Sudan is likewise experiencing poor economic conditions and a volatile security situation. As a result, the continuous clashes are likely to exacerbate the domestic situation.

If the Sudanese army manages to win the battle in the capital Khartoum, the RSF will move to other areas, particularly Darfur, thus turning into a rebel group that could pose a huge danger to security in Sudan. The RSF may also begin to mobilize and integrate Darfur's rebel groups into one entity in preparation for the separation of the region. This analysis is supported by the fact that the army is insisting on defeating the RSF, which it has designated as a renegade force. But if the opposite happens, the RSF defeats the army — the situation on the ground shows that the army has the upper hand due to its airpower superiority — this will mean dismantling the army and its well-established institutions, with Hemedti taking control of the whole of Sudan. Thus, he will rule Sudan solely, a scenario the majority of the Sudanese people reject.

The framework agreement includes mechanisms to dismantle the old order. Over the past days, Bashir's supporters have launched extensive campaigns to abort the agreement. Therefore, the continuation of the clashes between the army and RSF directly favors the supporters of the deposed government who seek to retake power. Moreover, if the agreement falls apart and the army seizes power, Bashir's supporters will triumph over Sudanese civilian political forces that are waging a fierce political battle to render successful the process of transitioning the country to civilian rule. Burhan's measures on October 25, 2021, allowed many of Bashir's supporters to return to state apparatuses.

The framework agreement's most important provisions stipulate: the revolutionary forces shall choose an interim prime minister; elections should be organized at the end of the two-year transitional period; the prime minister has the power to appoint a spy chief; a comprehensive drive to disclose crimes and hold perpetrators accountable shall be launched; a patriotic, unified and professional army shall be formed; the RSF shall be integrated into the armed forces; the security forces shall be answerable to the Ministry of Interior; military coups shall be criminalized and the army, security forces and intelligence services shall be banned from launching businesses; a balanced foreign policy that serves the country's interests shall be adopted and economic deterioration in the country shall be ceased. Thus, the continuation of the clashes between the army and RSF will lead to the framework agreement being aborted. Moreover, the clashes will lead to the army

hijacking the country under the pretext of volatility and the need to restore calmness to the country.

In conclusion, it is apparent the armed clashes currently raging between the army and RSF in the capital Khartoum and other Sudanese cities are reflective of the fact that the country has descended into chaos. Each side is adamant about crushing the other, despite regional and global fears that the conflict could expand. To avoid Sudan being flung into the unknown, the commanders of the two military apparatuses must listen to the voice of reason and choose dialogue. Arab countries are trying to contain the crisis by asking for an Arab League emergency summit to examine possible ways for calming the situation. Additionally, there is Saudi mediation between Hemedti and Burhan that could help in resolving the crisis before it is too late.



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