

SPECIAL REPORT

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Darfur after Bashir: Implications for Sudan's Transition and for the Region

By Jérôme Tubiana



People protest in the streets of Khartoum on October 27, 2021, following the military's overthrow of Sudan's transitional civilian government (Photo by Marwan Ali/AP)

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Summary

- Although nominally members of the revolutionary coalition that overthrew the regime of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir in April 2020, Darfuri rebel movements have played little role in the subsequent political transition.
- However, one of the key power-brokers in post-Bashir Sudan is a Darfuri known as Hemetti, whose Rapid Support Forces now constitute an armed force rivaling the Sudan Armed Forces.
- With its politics still unsettled, Darfur is likely to determine whether Sudan will achieve a lasting peace or relapse into war between its center and its historically marginalized peripheries. Despite the Juba peace agreement that Hemetti helped broker in October 2020 between Darfuri rebel groups and the government, violence could intensify in the wake of the October 2021 coup.
- Hemetti—and by extension Darfur—is also at the center of the reconfiguration of Sudan's regional relations, particularly with Chad and Libya.
- Western actors have limited but real leverage that they could use not only to put pressure on military players, but also to encourage pro-democracy groups in Khartoum and rebels and their supporters in the peripheries to reconcile their ambitions.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

Based on fieldwork conducted in late 2020 and early 2021 in North, West, and Central Darfur, as well as Khartoum, this report examines the political and security dynamics in Darfur since the overthrow of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir and assesses Darfur's significance in Sudan's national and international politics. Research for this report was supported by the Africa Center at the United States Institute of Peace.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace. An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

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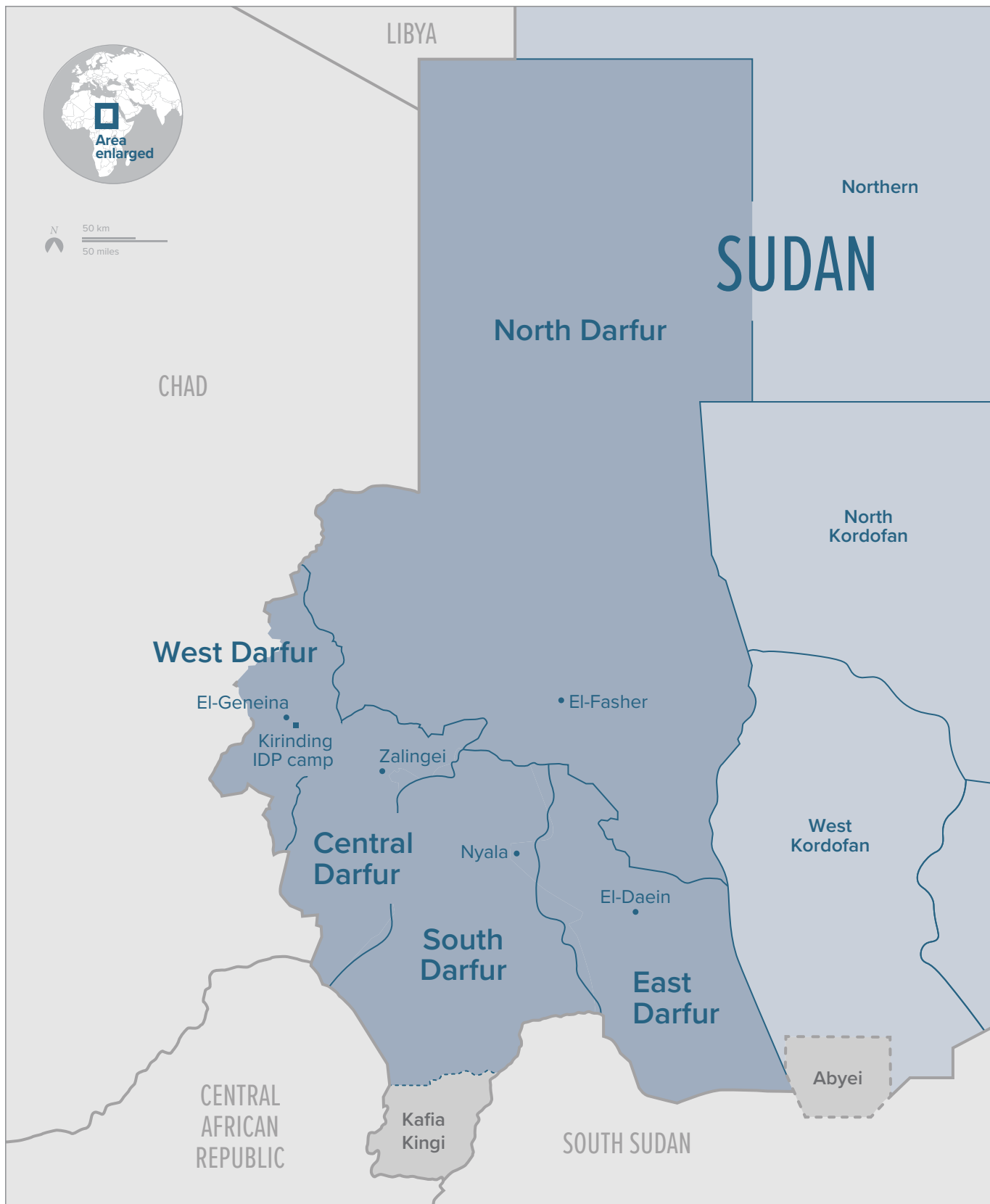
Mohamed Hamdan Daglo—more commonly known as Hemetti—poses for a photograph at his villa in Khartoum on September 30, 2020.
(Photo by Jérôme Tubiana)

Introduction

Sudan has been roiled by political instability in recent years. President Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled the country since 1989, was ousted in a revolution in April 2019, and the subsequent transitional civilian government was then overthrown in a military coup in October 2021. After a month, the civilian prime minister, Abdallah Hamdok, agreed to sign a new agreement confirming him as head of a future government composed of technocrats, but controlled behind the scenes by the military. This compromise encouraged the continuation of public protests, and Hamdok eventually resigned on January 2, 2022, leaving no doubt of the military’s ambition to consolidate its power rather than fulfilling its promise of democratic transition.

Amid this turmoil, Darfuri political players initially kept a low profile, but they have gradually come to play a more influential role, one commensurate with Darfur’s significance within Sudan. Some nine million people—more than 20 percent of the country’s total population—live in Sudan’s western region of Darfur. Since 2003, that region has been wracked by a bloody conflict between the Sudanese government and Darfuri rebel groups challenging their region’s persistent marginalization by successive regimes in Khartoum. Despite Bashir’s fall and the subsequent Juba peace agreement, insecurity in Darfur has grown worse. This internal violence undermines Sudan’s stability, continues to threaten the welfare of Sudanese civilians, and impedes tangible change for Darfur’s inhabitants.

Darfur remains pivotal to Sudan’s future for at least two other reasons. First, a Darfuri, Mohamed Hamdan Daglo—more commonly known as Hemetti—has leveraged his military position as leader



MAP OF DARFUR

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski and Olli Turho/Shutterstock

of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to become a leading figure in the country's transitional institutions. Consequently, Darfur offers an additional theater for those jockeying for power in Khartoum—including both Hemetti and his rivals. At the same time, the comparative exclusion of other Darfuri leaders from the initial transition's political structures has demonstrated that Sudan's center-periphery divide endures. Second, Sudan's international relations with western neighbors Chad and Libya are intimately linked to the politics of Darfur. The 2021 coup, which was influenced by a trend to military rule and authoritarianism in the region, may further encourage that trend, including in Chad.

This report addresses the changes in political leadership following Bashir's fall, describes Hemetti's rise to power, analyzes contemporary politics and insecurity in Darfur, assesses the Juba peace process, and explores the ways in which Sudan's regional relations have been reconfigured since the revolution. At the heart of the current fluid relationships between actors in Darfur and in Khartoum is an opportunistic and unnatural entente between Darfuri rebels and Sudan's military, an entente inspired by the rebels' frustration with civilian politicians from the center, whom they see as a new incarnation of the elite in power since Sudan's independence in 1956. A series of recommendations at the end of the report identifies ways in which Western actors can encourage the rebels in the peripheries to make common cause with civilian politicians in the center for the sake of peace and democracy. The report is based on 100 interviews conducted in person in September and October 2020 and in January and February 2021 in Darfur and Khartoum, as well as by telephone before and since the October 2021 coup, with political, military, and civil society leaders from Sudan and with international analysts and diplomats.¹

The Rise of Hemetti

Since 2013, Hemetti has been the leader of Sudan's paramilitary RSF, which gradually became the Bashir regime's praetorian guard. He achieved this position as one of many young Darfuri Arab war chiefs armed by Khartoum against Darfur's largely non-Arab rebel movements.² Because the Arab population of Darfur largely sided with Bashir's National Congress Party against the pro-rebel non-Arab tribes, the war in Darfur provoked ethno-political rifts in the region. President Bashir regarded Hemetti as the most loyal of these Darfur Arab allies and made him the RSF leader.

For some time before the 2019 revolution, Hemetti and the RSF defended an increasingly isolated Bashir against the possibility of a coup by the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF). However, Hemetti claimed to have distanced himself from Bashir from late 2017, partly for economic reasons. Hemetti asserted that companies close to the Bashir regime were threatening his personal interests in gold mining in Darfur and fueling Sudan's economic crisis by black market trading. In April 2019, he allied with senior army officers to remove and detain Bashir and declare the formation of the Transitional Military Council (TMC), which sought to preserve the military's power but without some of the most visible figures of the Bashir regime. Hemetti then reportedly played a crucial role in weakening the National Intelligence and Security Service and its forces and preventing its leader, Salah Abdallah "Gosh," from taking control of the TMC.

Hemetti's position was further strengthened when he became deputy head of the Sovereignty Council, a body created to govern Sudan for a 39-month transitional period as part of a

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power-sharing deal in August 2019 between the TMC and the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), the coalition of political parties and civil society organizations that played a leading role in the uprising. On paper, Hemetti was subordinate to the Sovereignty Council's leader, SAF General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. Yet his role as both deputy head of the council and head of the RSF made Darfur central

to Sudan's fate. Darfur is crucial to Hemetti as the source of most of his military recruits and economic resources. By 2021, the RSF was estimated to number between 75,000 and 100,000 men, compared with the SAF's 120,000 to 200,000 troops. Yet in spite of its smaller numbers, the RSF is widely considered to be the more militarily effective force. A Darfur power base and the military weight of the RSF have allowed Hemetti to seek power in Khartoum and to challenge the historic domination of Sudanese politics by elites from the center of the country. Even before Bashir's fall, Hemetti recruited non-Arabs (including former rebels) into the RSF, and he appointed individual Arab and non-Arab former members and sympathizers of rebel groups to advisory roles, encouraging them to play intermediary roles with rebel groups.

During the revolution, Hemetti sought support from protesting civil society and political groups predominantly based in Khartoum. At a massive pro-revolution sit-in organized in front of the military headquarters in April 2019, several posters were displayed with slogans such as "You Didn't Disappoint Us" and "Hemetti the Strong Frightens the Islamists." Politicians and activists from the center then worried about Hemetti's unexpected popularity and stressed his limited education and Chadian roots. The June 3, 2019 massacre of at least 128 civilian pro-democracy protesters in Khartoum further undermined Hemetti's popularity and strategy, with many groups initially blaming the RSF for the killings.³ By October 2020, reports had emerged that suggested the involvement of other players as well.

According to Hemetti, the campaign to blame him for the events of June 3 originated among actors in Khartoum, with both civilian revolutionaries and former regime figures targeting him because of his Darfuri origins. Because Hemetti perceived that Sudanese from Sudan's political and cultural center were biased against him, he sought support from non-Arab civilians and rebels in Darfur. He intended to consolidate players from Darfur and other peripheral regions as a bloc against the civilians and military from the center who had been elevated by the post-Bashir transitional arrangements and who threatened to dominate the new government. This unifying approach was well received by Darfuri rebels, who did not feature significantly within the FFC's leadership and had been largely excluded from the revolution. Hemetti's coalition building led to the Juba peace talks that began in September 2019 between rebels from Darfur and other peripheral areas of Sudan and the different wings of the transitional government. Dominated by Hemetti, the negotiations were an attempt to create a counterweight to the transition in the center by giving new prominence to the rebel movements. Hemetti and Darfuri rebels formed a tacit alliance against the civilian political parties in the FFC, and then also allied with the SAF (even though the SAF and their paramilitary allies are chiefly responsible for the devastation inflicted on Darfur since 2003), setting the stage for the 2021 coup. Hemetti did not, as he had promised and some had hoped, prevent the SAF

from staging a coup. On the contrary, the RSF took part in arresting and repressing protests, although Hemetti let al-Burhan remain at the forefront.

However, Hemetti's rise has also entangled him in conflicts with many enemies: rival militia leaders in Darfur, SAF officers and political leaders from the center who consider him a threat, and Islamists and former regime loyalists who see him as a traitor and will likely continue to do so regardless of his participation in the 2021 coup.

Some observers believe that Hemetti is ready to relinquish power if his personal and tribal economic interests are protected and if he is safeguarded from attempts to hold him accountable for crimes during the war in Darfur and against protesters in Khartoum. However, others assert that he has ambitions to consolidate his power as deputy of al-Burhan, if the latter decides to run in the expected July 2023 presidential vote, or even to become Sudan's next ruler himself, whether by seizing power or by standing for election. Some believe Hemetti's leadership ambitions incentivized him to spoil the transition, including the Sovereignty Council's planned shift to civilian leadership.⁴ His aspirations may also further encourage his evolution from an Arab tribal war chief to a representative of the peripheral areas of Sudan more broadly, or indeed even to a national leader. Prior to the 2021 coup, this personal transition appeared to have begun, alongside the possible transformation of the RSF from a personal, family, and tribal force to a more national and more professional army. Although Hemetti may not be able to win the gamble to dominate power in Khartoum for years to come, the existing civilian or military elites may strike bargains with him. In exchange for Hemetti's support, central Sudanese power structures could opt to abandon Darfur to him and give the RSF free rein over the region.

Hemetti's rise means that most Darfur Arab communities and militias perceive they are in a stronger position than they were before he came to power. Hemetti's Rizeigat Mahariya tribe, in particular, has been able to increase its influence in Sudan thanks to the war in Darfur, especially during Bashir's final years. Arab communities and militias may take advantage of the opportunity to capitalize on current circumstances by occupying more land or consolidating settlements, including in non-Arab territories captured during the war. However, they may also feel threatened, since Bashir's fall, by Hemetti's efforts to enlarge his tribal support base to include non-Arab rebels and civilians in Darfur and by some of the Juba peace agreement's provisions, not the least that land occupied during the war should be given back to its original owners. Hemetti's actions in initiating and supporting the Darfur peace talks, his promise to enforce the peace agreement, and his attempts to mediate local conflicts have all contributed to his strategic repositioning; that new stance, however, may conflict with his narrower tribal loyalties.

Politics of Darfur during the Transition

For civilians in Darfur, the end of the Bashir regime did not greatly change things on the ground. Since Bashir's fall, the Juba peace talks and the question of the allegiance of Darfur's rebels have become areas of competition between political forces in Khartoum, including between

Hemetti and the SAF, between Hemetti and the FFC, and within the FFC. This competition, however, has done little to improve governance for most Darfuris.

Over the course of the negotiations that led to the August 2019 power-sharing deal, the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF)—a coalition of the leading armed groups opposed to the Bashir regime—began to develop a negative perception of the FFC. Even though the SRF is nominally part of the coalition, it has come to view the FFC as a new incarnation of the center that continues to marginalize the peripheries. Prior to the 2021 coup, “resistance committees” in Darfur, the primarily organic community attempts to organize local forms of opposition to Khartoum, shared similar sentiments: in their eyes, politicians from the center had stolen the revolution from those who initiated it.⁵ These Darfuri resistance committees include former armed rebels, and the rebel groups see the committees’ nonviolent actions as complementary to the armed struggle. In their protests, the committees combine the revolution’s national slogans with Darfur-specific demands for peace and security.

New Insecurity in Darfur

Despite Bashir’s ouster, insecurity has continued in Darfur, even after the Juba peace agreement in October 2020. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Incidents of intercommunal violence reported in Darfur doubled during the second half of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.”⁶ Much of the violence has taken place in West Darfur, including (but not limited to) the following notable instances:

- December 2019: An attack by armed Arabs, including the RSF, against the Kirinding camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and nearby villages, killing between 60 and 90 people (mostly Masalit) and displacing 46,000.
- July 2020: An attack against Masalit civilians in Misterei, killing between 60 and 80 people, during which recently reformed Masalit self-defense militias fought back, reportedly killing as many as 100 Arabs.
- January 2021: A second attack by armed Arabs against the Kirinding IDP camp and against mostly Masalit residents and IDPs in and around El-Geneina, killing between 109 and 163 and displacing 108,000. Here, too, Masalit self-defense groups put up fierce resistance and reportedly killed around 200 Arabs.
- April 2021: Similar Arab-Masalit clashes in and around El-Geneina, killing at least 144 people and displacing approximately 65,000.
- November 2021: Clashes between Arab and non-Arab communities around the Jebel Mun area, north of El-Geneina, killing between 140 and 300 people and displacing approximately 12,000. Here, too, non-Arab self-defense groups mobilized, uniting fighters from the local Misirya Jebel and Zaghawa communities, reportedly killing 100 Arabs.
- December 2021: Arab-Masalit clashes in the Kreinik area, east of El-Geneina, killing between 67 and 88 people and displacing at least 62,000 Masalit.⁷
- January 2022: Arab attack on the Adikong village, west of El-Geneina, killing 9 and displacing up to 20,000 Masalit.



After the attack by Arab militias on the Kirinding IDP camp in January 2021, about 100,000 Masalit took refuge in more than 80 gathering sites, such as this one on the grounds of the state ministry of education, in El-Geneina. (Photo by Jérôme Tubiana)

Other violent attacks took place in South Darfur, including clashes between Arab and Arabized Fellata militias in January and June 2021, resulting in 72 and at least 36 deaths, respectively.⁸ In North Darfur, since August 2021, Rizeigat Arab militias opposed to the peace agreement have attacked Zaghawa IDPs returning to farm in Tawila locality, displacing 35,000.

The United Nations–African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) often described such moments of violence in euphemistic terms, such as “seasonal disputes between farmers and pastoralists.”⁹ The government continued to use such language to downplay these incidents. However, the obvious pattern of attacks suggests repeated violence by Arab militias against non-Arab civilians, including IDPs. Militias opposed to Hemetti are sometimes blamed for these attacks. RSF members also are sometimes accused of being among these militias, though their presence does not mean that Hemetti or other RSF leaders ordered them to carry out these attacks. Still, the presence of Hemetti’s forces and kinsmen among the perpetrators has weakened his attempts to mediate local pacts after some of these incidents.

The government has been repeatedly blamed for failing to react to the escalating violence. In July 2021, as Arab militias attacked protesters in Fatta Borno, North Darfur, killing 10 people, the local authorities were accused of enabling the massacre by withdrawing security forces from

Many Sudanese . . . believe that the recent conflicts in Darfur, Kordofan, the east of the country, and Sinnar have been engineered by former Bashir regime loyalists . . . to be part of a proxy war between Hemetti and the former regime loyalists.

the area as retaliation against the protesters. The usual government reaction to such instances of violence has been to deploy joint security forces from the SAF, RSF, and police or Central Reserve Police (and more recently, rebels who signed the Juba agreement), even if locals claim that the same forces were involved with perpetrators in the incidents, sometimes on opposed sides. “Hemetti said he wants peace, and he may be honest, but his kinsmen

make trouble and he can’t always confront them,” a Fatta Borno protester said. Yet in various localities, non-Arab civilians, including government officials, noted that among those joint forces being systematically deployed in reaction to violent incidents, the RSF was most active in preventing further violence. “Hemetti is our only teeth,” said one civilian government official.

Far from being seasonal disputes, some of the violence in 2020 was linked to a series of pro-revolution protests held across Sudan, including in Darfur.¹⁰ In Kebkabiya in June and in Fatta Borno and Misterei in July, Arab militias targeted protesters and civilian resistance committees. The protests in Fatta Borno and Misterei were directed specifically at armed Arabs occupying land in the area. Because the protests in Darfur had multiple motives, including voicing support for the pro-democracy demands of Khartoum protesters and expressing local grievances such as land occupation, they did not, except at the earliest stages of the revolution, bring Arabs and non-Arabs together over shared goals; instead, they often triggered new violence.

Local violence also included conflicts between Arab or Arabized communities. In such cases, the communities loyal to Hemetti that make up the RSF’s core faced off against others who feel sidelined by his takeover of Darfur Arab militias. Reportedly, among the latter were militias loyal to Hemetti’s main rival, Musa Hilal, the historic paramount *janjawid* (Arab militia) leader and thus a prime actor in the Sudanese government’s counterinsurgency campaign during the war in Darfur.¹¹ Hemetti arrested Hilal in 2017, in part because Hilal refused to comply with Bashir’s and Hemetti’s orders to integrate his forces (officially part of the Border Guards, under SAF command) into the RSF. More than 20,000 Border Guards, mostly under Hilal, eventually were brought into the RSF. Between 15,000 and 18,000 men, mostly from Hilal’s Rizeigat Mahamid tribe, reportedly were later fired from the RSF in 2019 and 2020, and the recruitment of Hilal’s Mahamid kinsmen stopped.¹² Non-Arab civilians and rebels also accuse militias loyal to Hilal of conducting the attacks on Fatta Borno and in West Darfur, although with regard to the latter, local RSF leaders are more commonly accused. In March 2021, Hilal was released after an agreement with Hemetti, but his supporters doubt the reconciliation will last.

Many Sudanese, including Hemetti and his supporters, believe that the recent conflicts in Darfur, Kordofan, the east of the country, and Sinnar have been engineered by former Bashir regime loyalists, in particular by SAF military intelligence and Salah Gosh, now exiled in Egypt. According to this view, these conflicts were purported to be part of a proxy war between Hemetti and the former regime loyalists, the likely intent of which was to oblige Hemetti to redeploy RSF troops from Khartoum to these war zones and thus weaken his influence in the center.

Darfur Arab communities, including leaders who generally benefited from the Bashir regime, have felt frustrated by the revolution and betrayed by Hemetti and his rapprochement with

Darfuri rebels through the Juba agreement. The 2021 coup will likely embolden them, which risks provoking further violence in Darfur. Yet their attitude toward Hemetti is ambivalent: some hope he will support them in local conflicts, but others still feel threatened by his entente with the rebels and by the Juba agreement.

By the terms of the Juba agreement, Arab communities and militias will have to leave territories they have occupied and allow the non-Arab communities they displaced to return and exercise their land rights under a restored customary land tenure system, which should take precedence over Sudanese statutory land regulations. Modern approaches favored by international actors and technocrats who draft peace agreements, such as adopting a system of land registration, are unlikely to lead to the restitution of the land to its original owners. The Juba agreement's definition of Darfur's precolonial land tenure system as one based on tribal territories rather than on individual leaders managing multiethnic territories is misleading and may fuel tensions, even if some rebel leaders support this approach. The return of the displaced to their original lands will require negotiation, but also may necessitate the use of force against armed occupiers. Solving land disputes is likely to be complicated and time consuming, as experiences from elsewhere show; in eastern Chad, for instance, land disputes from the 2005–10 conflict are still unresolved.¹³

Rebel groups that have rejected the Juba peace process are also accused of having fueled violence in Darfur. For instance, supporters of Abdelwahid al-Nur, leader of a Sudanese Liberation Army faction, are accused of being among those who attacked a police station in Kutum in July 2020. Yet even though Abdelwahid's influence among IDPs is not disputed, protesters in Kutum and Fatta Borno are not necessarily opposed to the Juba agreement and put forward demands similar to those negotiating in Juba, such as the evacuation of those occupying land, the return of the IDPs to their homes, and justice for crimes committed.

The other main rebel leader outside of the Juba agreement, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, leads the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) forces that control a large part of South Kordofan's Nuba Mountains. Al-Hilu, who is of Masalit origin, is also accused of fueling tensions between Masalit and Arabs in Darfur.¹⁴ Since Bashir's departure, the idea of uniting "indigenous groups" across Sudan's peripheries has grown among Nuba, Masalit, and other non-Arabs. There are reports that, since 2011, several hundred Masalit youth from all over Sudan have joined al-Hilu's largely Nuba SPLM-N in South Kordofan and Blue Nile and that, since 2020, a limited number of them have returned to Darfur in reaction to Arab attacks against the Masalit. Al-Hilu remains popular among the Masalit revolutionary youth and IDPs in West Darfur, yet long-standing Masalit attempts to put themselves under al-Hilu's leadership have been frustrated by al-Hilu's reluctance to fight in Darfur. In the meantime, fighting has occasionally pitted al-Hilu's faction against rival SPLM-N troops loyal to Malik Agar, historically the most powerful SPLM-N figure in Blue Nile.¹⁵ Agar, remaining part of the SRF coalition, has been more pliant in talks with the government, signed the Juba peace agreement, and reportedly has received support from the SAF in South Kordofan and from the RSF in Blue Nile, allowing him to recruit troops. He also appeared to tacitly support the October 2021 coup, which allowed him to remain a member of the Sovereignty Council. These parallel dynamics linking conflicts in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile are a stark reminder of the national dimension of local tensions and how they may undermine the national transitional project.

From the Juba Peace Process to the October 2021 Coup

Pursuing peace in Darfur has become a competition between Hemetti and the FFC and the transitional government's civilian leadership. Both have held separate talks with Darfur's rebel movements, and Hemetti has been more successful than the civilian leaders in gaining the rebels' support. In June 2019, Hemetti held talks—initially under Chadian auspices—with Minni Minawi, the leader of the Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minawi (SLA-MM), the strongest rebel group, as well as with leaders of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), another long-standing Darfuri rebel movement and SRF component. Hemetti wanted to secure a quick agreement between the rebels and the TMC before the TMC and the FFC reached their own accord. The FFC's civilian leaders also engaged in negotiations with the TMC without the SRF being present. The FFC then met with the rebels in Addis Ababa in July 2019 in an attempt to bridge the gaps. Although the August 2019 constitutional charter addressed some issues high on the rebels' agenda, the FFC's civilian leaders refused to wait for the rebels to hold peace talks before forming the transitional institutions. As a member of the transitional government put it: "Politicians and rebels together boarded the FFC bus, but the FFC got down at the first stop, that of the constitutional charter. The rebels wanted to continue up to the next station, called peace." Those discordant ambitions benefited Hemetti's attempts to engage the rebels through the talks that began in Juba in September 2019.

Civilian politicians in Khartoum began to see the Juba talks as an attempt by Hemetti to derail the transition and tried to force their way into the negotiations. However, the FFC failed to control the peace process, which remained largely in Hemetti's hands, except for the FFC's input in various thematic technical committees and the SAF taking over the security arrangement discussions.

To compete with Hemetti, the FFC also tried to have Prime Minister Hamdok lead the talks but were unsuccessful. Hamdok attempted a parallel engagement with the rebels who were most reluctant to join the peace talks, Abdelwahid and al-Hilu. In September 2020, shortly after the signature of the Juba agreement, Hamdok signed a separate preliminary agreement with the latter in Addis Ababa. As al-Hilu demanded, this agreement required the "separation of religion and state" to be enshrined in the constitution, until or unless South Kordofan and Blue Nile were granted the "right to self-determination," and allowed al-Hilu's faction to keep its forces armed.¹⁶ Even more than his secularism, al-Hilu's overtly secessionist stance was a red line for other government negotiators. Others in the government felt the deal with Hamdok was "damaging" and "an attempt to spoil Juba." Further talks between al-Hilu and the SAF stalled.

In Khartoum, the Juba agreement had a mixed reception. Hemetti and the signatory rebels cheered the deal, and the center-left Sudanese Congress Party (SCP) initially offered some support. The left (in particular the Communist Party), the Umma Party, and the Islamists remained hostile to the agreement, concerned it gave too much to rebels from the peripheries. From the perspective of many civilian politicians, the Juba peace agreement is undermining the constitutional charter—which was amended in line with the agreement in November 2020—to the detriment of the center and of the civilian share of power within the transitional authorities.



Rapid Support Forces soldiers watch at a horse race in El-Fasher, North Darfur, in February 2022, won by a horse belonging to the state's RSF commander. (Photo by Jérôme Tubiana)

As expected, the rebels remained close to Hemetti. But as they went back to Khartoum, they also attempted to diversify their alliances and expressed continued differences of opinion over who to ally with, including in the event of tensions between the RSF, the SAF, and the FFC. Isolated within the SRF because of its leaders' Islamist backgrounds, the JEM openly attempted to transform into a political party that could gather the remnants of the divided Islamic movement and eventually act as their entry point into a government from which they were excluded. Ultimately, in September 2021, the JEM and the SLA-MM reunited, purporting to form a second FFC (sometimes known as FFC2, or the FFC National Charter) opposed to the political parties and rejecting Hamdok's attempts to reunite the FFC. This move arguably paved the way for their further alliance with Hemetti and the SAF and for the coup.

Implementation of the Juba peace agreement has faced many obstacles, including an unrealistic calendar, funding shortfalls, and different interpretations of its security and justice provisions. The agreement does not have detailed guidance on how to integrate nonstate actors from Darfur and Sudan's other peripheries into the civilian administration and the government's security forces. Its most concrete provision is the establishment of a 12,000-strong joint force for Darfur, with 6,000 government personnel (drawn from the SAF, the RSF, the police, and

Darfur's rebel movements have learned from earlier experiences of their combatants' failed integration into government forces that they should not concede on the initial promises of integration.

the intelligence service) and 6,000 members of the rebel forces. It was supposed to replace UNAMID forces, whose mandate was terminated in December 2020. According to the agreement's matrix, the joint force should have become operational in early January 2021, but its formation was only officially launched in September 2021, and joint training of 3,300 troops did not begin until January 2022,

when the force's numbers were then increased to 20,000. Rebel leaders then blamed the SAF, and specifically military intelligence, for being reluctant to implement the agreement's security arrangements. Several thousand rebel combatants returned from Libya to join the force, and some rebel factions with few troops recruited civilians or reintegrated former combatants—some of whom were attracted by the promise of salaries, others of whom were willing to enlist to protect their communities.

All in all, the Juba agreement does not specify how many rebel combatants should be integrated into existing government forces or benefit from disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs, nor does it give the timeline over which this transition should occur. Darfur's rebel movements have learned from earlier experiences of their combatants' failed integration into government forces that they should not concede on the initial promises of integration. Hundreds of non-Arab rebels have joined the RSF individually or in small groups since 2016, and they have had more positive experiences than those who joined the SAF in earlier years. After Darfur's Arabs, the second-largest community in the RSF is said to be non-Arabs from Blue Nile, possibly numbering 20,000, including former SPLM-N rebels. The RSF also reportedly includes Nuba fighters and troops from eastern Sudan. These additional recruits have allowed Hemetti to claim that the RSF is now "a national army," more representative of Sudan's diversity than the SAF.

Non-Arab Darfuris in the RSF state that their main motivations for joining were to protect Darfur's non-Arab communities and to change the demographic balance in government forces.¹⁷ Rebels integrated into the RSF are advising Juba's signatories to join them. Hemetti appears to favor integrating rebels in larger numbers than in the past, but warns that "limited financial capacity" may mean that the RSF can accept no more than a quarter of the rebels who should be integrated into government forces. Although Hemetti appears to be willing to increase the diversity of the RSF, earlier Arab recruits are afraid of seeing too many rebels integrated.

Hemetti's reluctance to integrate his troops into the SAF was criticized by the SAF, Hamdok, the FFC, and some rebels. Yet it mirrors the position of many rebels, including both Juba signatories and al-Hilu, that their troops should join the SAF only after a comprehensive reform of the security sector, allowing them to obtain leadership positions and thus maintain control over their fighters. Hamdok also advocated for such reform, as provided for in the constitutional charter, warning that the failure to achieve it may lead to "chaos" and "civil war."¹⁸ Friction between the SAF, supporting that demand, and the RSF, resisting it, culminated in mid-2021, with fears of fighting between them. But al-Burhan and Hemetti seemed to agree on resisting other civilian and rebel demands, on strengthening their alliance against civilian politicians, and on countering (as some of their supporters justified the coup) alleged attempted disruption by other, more

radical heirs of the Bashir regime excluded from power since 2019. In the second half of 2021, al-Burhan and Hemetti appeared to have overcome their differences over the autonomy of the RSF from the SAF, isolating the civilian government.

Prior to the October 2021 coup, the Hamdok government appeared to be threatened from various sides. The military—especially the SAF—had many concerns: government attempts to take control of their economic assets; efforts at security sector reform; progress (albeit slow) on accountability for crimes committed in Darfur and during the revolution; and pressure by the committee charged with dismantling the former regime.¹⁹ The left was angry with (unpopular) austerity economic policies. And Darfuri rebels were frustrated with the reluctance to implement the Juba agreement, not least the provisions regarding security arrangements and the transfer of Bashir and other indictees to the International Criminal Court—grievances that were directed at both the civilian government and the military.

Hamdok's attempts to reunite the FFC failed. By October 2021, using the persistent divisions within the civilian government as a justification, the JEM and the SLA-MM appeared aligned with the military in organizing street protests intended to pressure Hamdok to reshape his government according to their wishes—and, if Hamdok refused to be swayed, in staging a coup. Although the rebels were above all motivated by their frustration with the FFC, the JEM and the SLA-MM were subsequently accused of being complicit with the SAF and Hemetti in ousting the civilian government. In the aftermath of the coup, Minni Minawi began to backtrack, notably calling for the freeing of political prisoners. Other Juba rebel signatories initially opposed the coup, but their main representatives ultimately agreed to conserve their newly acquired positions in the reshaped Sovereignty Council and government, from which FFC representatives were excluded.

In Darfur itself, there was an unprecedented mobilization against the coup, leading to a massive wave of arrests. Darfuris at large have been frustrated with the trajectory of the transition since Bashir's ouster, but that does not mean that they want to see a return to military or Islamist rule. JEM leaders' lesser commitment to Darfur than to a national Islamic agenda has continued to deprive them of non-Islamist Darfuri support. In addition, both the JEM and the SLA-MM have found it difficult to convince their base to support a Juba agreement that is widely seen as an entente with Hemetti. The alignment of rebel leaders with the military risks further distancing the leaders from their base, including fighters and civilian supporters.

Continuing violence, including renewed tribal tensions, in particular between Zaghawa and Arabs, could also weaken the rebel leaders and put an end to their entente with Hemetti. Members and supporters of both the RSF and the rebels, including rebels recently returned from Libya, have been involved in fighting. In late 2021, rebels were reportedly killed by Arab militias in Tawila and Kreinik localities. Deadly skirmishes also reportedly took place between rebels and RSF members (including over control of abandoned UN assets in El-Fasher in February 2022).²⁰

The military-civilian confrontation did not overshadow other divides, including divisions between civilian politicians; the persistent competition between the SAF and the RSF; the divide between the center and the peripheries, which could lead Darfuri rebels and Hemetti to further unite against the SAF; and ideological differences between Islamists and non-Islamists, which could impact the coup's supporters as well as their foreign backers.

New Regional Relations: Divisions and Realignments

In the eyes of states in Sudan's neighborhood, Bashir's expansionist, Islamist regime had to be closely watched for its political and military support to fellow members of the Muslim Brotherhood and violent Islamist groups outside Sudan. In its latter years, Bashir's regime was seen by some neighboring countries as much weaker, but still dangerous, because its need for financial and political support made it vulnerable to the influence of richer, stronger regional powers. Those varying perceptions are still in play today, especially since the 2021 coup. Sudan's military powerbrokers, including Hemetti, and through him Darfur as a whole, are at the center of Sudan's reconfigured regional and international relations. Their sometimes contradictory long-term aspirations and more immediate interests in influencing the balance of power in Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Libya could see them play both peacemaking and peacebreaking roles in those countries.

Some observers believe that Hemetti might support an Arab takeover in Chad, not least because his Mahariya Arab tribe straddles the border between Sudan and Chad. If he does interfere in Chadian politics, it could be seen as advancing what scholar Alex de Waal and others have described as a cross-border tribal Arab supremacist agenda.²¹ This ethno-political current, influenced by the Chadian Arab rebellion in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as by Muammar Gadhafi's ideology in Libya, contributed to the formation of the janjawid militias in Darfur.²² For supporters of that agenda, Hemetti, who has remained close to known Darfuri Arab supremacists, is a long-awaited implementer. But, as mentioned earlier, Hemetti has also recently recruited former rebels, both Arab and non-Arab, into the ranks of the RSF and of his allies, and has attempted to garner support from other non-Arabs in the peripheries. It is too early to say whether his overall approach will tend toward Arab supremacism or toward greater inclusivity.

Meanwhile, Ethiopia and Egypt have both sought Sudanese support in their dispute over the filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile. The Sudanese appeared caught in the middle, seemingly unable to align with either state without damaging their relationship with the other. Ethiopia initially saw Prime Minister Hamdok, long based in Addis Ababa, as an ally on the Nile question. But before his ousting, Hamdok appeared to have aligned with Egypt, as Hemetti did before him. Despite these attempts to avoid Cairo's enmity, Egypt seemed not to fully trust Hamdok or Hemetti and to prefer to work with SAF officers, with whom the Egyptian army has long-standing connections. As a result, if Khartoum were to restore a military regime that had been purged of the Muslim Brotherhood's influence—paralleling Egypt's own Sisi regime—Cairo would likely deem it acceptable.

The recent conflict between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has also affected Sudan-Ethiopia relations. In December 2020, taking advantage of the Ethiopian army's preoccupation with Tigray, the SAF reportedly took control of farmlands in the Fashaga border area, which had been occupied by ethnic Amhara Ethiopian farmers and allied militias. After an ambush by Ethiopian militias, RSF troops were deployed to the area. Since March 2021, Sudan and Ethiopia have traded accusations of supporting each



Yasir Said Arman of the SPLM-North shakes hands with then Chadian president Idriss Déby, as representatives of Darfur rebel groups look on, at the Juba agreement signing ceremony on October 3, 2020. (Photo by Maura Ajak/AP)

other's rebels. Ongoing tensions may trigger a border war between the two countries and, together with Addis Ababa's intransigence on the dam, push Khartoum to lean closer to Cairo. A low-level border war may also be a way for SAF generals to garner support domestically. Hemetti seems reluctant to engage in such a war or to side with Egypt or the TPLF against Ethiopia and its Eritrean ally.

Although maybe less enthusiastically than Egypt, and in the context of increasing differences between Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia also appears to favor an SAF-led military regime. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), however, fearing the persistent influence of the Muslim Brotherhood within the SAF, may be closer to Hemetti. Abu Dhabi financed Hemetti, while also reportedly giving financial support to political parties such as the Umma Party and the SCP and to various rebel groups; the UAE also funded the Juba talks. Both Hemetti and al-Burhan seem to have earned Saudi and Emirati trust by sending RSF and SAF troops to Yemen as part of the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthi rebels. Reportedly, before the anti-Bashir revolution, as many as 16,000 RSF troops were deployed to Yemen at a given time, six times as many troops as the SAF deployed there. Later, the RSF deployment decreased, partly because of FFC criticism. Yemen was an important source of

funds for the RSF, reportedly paying the RSF's command with hard currency—even though the soldiers received their salaries in Sudanese pounds. (Even in Sudanese pounds, however, the pay for fighting in Yemen—the equivalent of \$4,000 per month for an ordinary soldier—was still attractive for Sudanese troops.) FFC complaints reportedly stopped direct payments to the RSF.

Despite the widespread international condemnation of the October 2021 coup, a number of countries—including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt—appeared convinced that a military regime would suit their interests. Russia appeared to favor the coup, and shortly thereafter al-Burhan recommitted Sudan to the suspended project of building a Russian naval base in Port Sudan. Hemetti reaffirmed this commitment during a weeklong visit to Moscow in February–March 2022, at the very moment Russia was launching its invasion of Ukraine. (Sudan is reportedly a main source of the gold Moscow accumulated ahead of the war.) Turkey, Qatar, Israel, Chad, and South Sudan also each have reasons to believe that the coup will advance their interests. Given that several of those countries are at odds with one another, the risk is real for Sudan to become a theater for multiple proxy wars. There is also a risk that the Sudanese military, tired of Western pressure, will give up its strategy of rapprochement with the West and its main regional allies, and will move back to Bashir's alliances with Russia and China.

The following discussion looks in turn at Sudan's relations with Chad and Libya. In each case, the future of the state is closely linked to Darfur's politics and the progress of Sudan's political transition. The rise of Hemetti has implications for cross-border and domestic conflicts in these countries and could trigger policy shifts in response.

CHAD AFTER BASHIR, AND DARFUR AFTER DÉBY

Chad has played an initiating role and been supportive of the Juba peace deal and of an alliance between Hemetti and the Darfuri rebels, hoping that these moves will prevent Chadian rebels from receiving renewed support from Sudan. Following Bashir's fall, President Idriss Déby's once uneasy relations with Darfur's Zaghawa rebels appeared to have improved considerably.²³ In 2019, Déby reconciled with both Minni Minawi and Jibril Ibrahim of the JEM. Reports have since circulated that some Sudanese Zaghawa, including Darfuri rebels, may even opt to fight as proxy forces for Chad—as they did more than a decade ago. This possibility regained momentum with Déby's death in April 2021, which threw the Zaghawa community into uncertainty. They may therefore fight against Chadian rebels, whether in Chad itself or in Libya, where both Sudanese and Chadian rebels are based. Since Déby took power in 1990 thanks to a rebel force partly recruited among Sudanese Zaghawa, members of that community have been steadily enlisted into the Chadian army.

Conversely, since 2003, Darfuri Arab militias have recruited extensively among Chadian Arabs, including those who settled in Darfur in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and some who came from Chad after 2003. Since Bashir's fall, new waves of Chadian Arab youths, including rebels and ex-rebels, reportedly have rushed to Darfur to join the RSF and benefit from Hemetti's rise, lured by the promise of wealth (including through deployment to Yemen), status, and power, and for some by the hope they could get support for armed opposition activities in Chad. By 2021, as many as 6,000 Chadian Arabs were reportedly part of the RSF.

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disputed with non-Arab communities. Chadian Arabs who joined the RSF but who have since returned to Chad have been accused of exporting the Darfur violence across the border, provoking unprecedented ethnic violence in the country's east. According to non-Arabs who denounced the violence and Arab elders who regret their youths' involvement in Sudanese militias, returning Chadian RSF troops have a mindset tinged with an Arab supremacist

ideology that justifies violence against non-Arabs. These Chadian Arabs have absorbed Darfuri Arabs' grievances and sense of exclusion, and these sentiments have influenced their perception that they too are ethnically marginalized and targeted by their government. Bashir's regime long put forth the idea that Déby, as a Zaghawa, used violence against Chadian Arabs, thus justifying Sudanese government violence against the Zaghawa and other non-Arabs in Darfur. As Chadian Arab combatants continue to return from Sudan with military training and sometimes with weapons, as well as with experience of warfare involving abuses against civilians, Chad has seen more violent forms of conflict.

Hemetti has maintained strong ties with Chadian leaders from his Mahariya tribe. It is widely believed in both Chad and Darfur that Hemetti could be tempted to back an Arab takeover of Chad or at least feel obliged to financially, politically, and militarily support his neighboring Mahariya kin. Déby appeared well aware of this prospect and tried to mitigate the risk of a new Arab rebellion by strengthening ties with Chadian Arab politicians and, via the same politicians, with Hemetti himself. After May 2019, the Chad-Sudan rapprochement changed from a personal deal between Déby and Bashir to a new personal deal between Déby and Hemetti, benefiting from their common international alignment with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, as well as from local connections. Déby supported Hemetti's attempts to ally with Darfuri rebels: in June 2019, Déby organized a meeting between Hemetti, Minni Minawi, and JEM representatives, paving the way for the Juba peace talks. N'Djamena also pressured Darfuri rebels to make peace with Khartoum and to pursue integration with the RSF and encouraged contacts between Hemetti and France.

Déby's increasing closeness with Chadian and Darfuri Arabs once angered his own Zaghawa community, and was one reason for the contestation of his leadership from within the Zaghawa. Both Déby's earlier tensions with non-Arab Darfuri rebels and his entente with Hemetti, as well as the growing power of First Lady Hinda Déby and her partly Arab family, led to Déby's growing unpopularity within the Zaghawa. This discontent was publicly expressed on social media and led to stronger Zaghawa support for the Zaghawa rebel Union des forces de la résistance (UFR) movement and for Déby's cousin Yahya Dillo, a former member of the UFR and now official opposition Zaghawa leader. Increased divisions within the Zaghawa community likely played a key role in Déby's death; although the official report said he was killed in combat against rebel forces, another widespread account is that Déby was killed during a violent altercation with a dissident general from his own clan, who was also killed.²⁴ Since Déby's death, it seems the Zaghawa community, including its Sudanese component, has closed ranks, fearful that continuing divides over Déby's succession could make the Zaghawa vulnerable to retaliatory violence from both rebels and other Chadian communities.



General Mahamat “Kaka” Idriss Déby, shown here at a meeting with French president Emmanuel Macron in Paris on November 12, 2021, became the leader of Chad’s Transitional Military Council (and de facto leader of the country) following the death of his father, President Idriss Déby, in April 2021. (Photo by Michel Euler/AP)

In March 2019, when the UFR conducted a raid from Libya into northern Chad, the Chadian army, with mostly Zaghawa officers, refused to fight. Déby then called Paris for help and the UFR column was annihilated by French jets. France remained Déby’s unwavering shield, if one believes an anonymous French official’s declaration in June 2019: “If tomorrow Boko Haram attacks from Lake Chad or a group of janjawid militias tumbles from Sudan, we will very certainly lend [Déby] a hand again.”²⁵ During the April 2021 attack by the (non-Zaghawa) Front for Change and Concord in Chad, presumably because the Chadian army appeared more mobilized, France reportedly limited its intervention to nonaggressive overflights of the rebels but still provided intelligence and logistical support to the army.

After Déby’s death, transitional authorities in both Chad and Sudan indicated that they were keen to continue their good relations. The deal between Déby and Hemetti was immediately renewed between Hemetti and the new Chadian Transitional Military Council chaired by Déby’s son, General Mahamat “Kaka” Idriss Déby. No less swiftly, French diplomats discussed Chad with Sudan’s transitional leaders, including al-Burhan, Hemetti, and Hamdok. Hemetti reportedly committed not to destabilize Chad. The Sudanese authorities do not appear ready to oppose French

policy in Chad and the Sahel. Sudan's military leaders, even before Bashir's fall, repeatedly expressed their desire to join the French- and US-backed G5-Sahel coalition in order to strengthen their links with France, the European Union, and the West generally.²⁶ Given that a large share of Hemetti's power and wealth came from sending the RSF to Yemen, and that theater is now less active, he may be keen to deploy the RSF in the Sahel. He publicly stated that Déby's partnership with France—lending forces to France in exchange for political, financial, and military support—was a model for the RSF, which already claims to be fighting terrorism and curbing migration on behalf of Europe. Hemetti has repeatedly complained that those efforts have not been supported and recognized by Europe; it is likely, however, that the same sensitivity that pushed European officials to maintain some distance from the RSF will prevent the force's deployment in the Sahel, in particular given France and the European Union's condemnations of the 2021 coup. In addition, a possible rapprochement between Khartoum and Moscow, and through it improved relations with the Russian-backed government in CAR, could lead to new tensions between Sudan and Chad.

Paris's leniency toward the unconstitutional succession of Déby may have been interpreted in Khartoum as a sign that the West could accept the coup in Sudan. France used to cite Sudan's military-civilian partnership as a model for Chad to follow, but there is now a risk that the trend toward military rule in Sudan and elsewhere—in Guinea and Mali, for example—could encourage the Chadian military to cling to power.

There are also risks that current violence in Darfur could again spread to Chad and hamper relations between N'Djamena and Khartoum. In particular, the conflict in Jebel Mun, West Darfur, since November 2021 was reportedly triggered by raids in 2020 by Chadian Zaghawa on Arab camel herds in Darfur, followed by a series of revenge murders on both sides. This reportedly led to the reconstitution of Zaghawa self-defense militias, which include both Chadian and Sudanese members and which allegedly receive support from the Chadian Zaghawa community and armed forces. Déby had deployed considerable leverage to prevent his own Chadian Zaghawa kin from supporting the Sudanese Zaghawa, but his successor, less skilled in managing Chad-Darfur dynamics, appears to have less ability to curb cross-border movements of fighters and weapons.

LIBYA AND DARFURI FIGHTERS

Sudan's alignment with Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar and Turkey first benefited Bashir's regime but eventually contributed to his downfall. Consequently, the new Sudanese authorities shifted their backing in Libya from the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli to General Khalifa Haftar's campaign against the GNA. This change in alliances may lead to greater Sudanese military involvement in Libya—though Hemetti, who leads the only Sudanese government force capable of fighting as a proxy for Haftar, has so far refrained from undertaking such an intervention. Since mid-2020, the balance of power between Turkish and Russian forces in Libya has created relative calm and engendered an environment where Sudanese combatants may be less needed.

The conflict in Libya has attracted young Darfuri fighters or would-be fighters, including rebels or ex-rebels, current and former members of Arab militias, and ordinary civilians, including migrants.²⁷ Some were recruited as individual mercenaries, while others joined as entire rebel groups, in particular on the side of Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces. Beginning in 2014–15,

Many Sudanese civilian and military actors regard Hemetti's internal and external influence as a potential threat to the staying power of Sudan's "traditional" postcolonial powerbrokers.

the main Darfuri rebel groups, including some that signed peace agreements with Khartoum and thus theoretically were the responsibility of the Sudanese government, fought on Haftar's side. Darfuri Arab militias or ex-militias in Libya fought on both sides. These additional players reportedly included 1,000 members of Musa Hilal's Sudanese Revolutionary Awakening Council, who are hostile to

Hemetti and who include many defectors (or retirees) from the RSF. This group may use funding and equipment obtained in Libya, where most fight for Haftar, to start a new rebellion in Darfur.

From mid- to late 2019, a 700-strong RSF contingent was secretly sent to Libya to support Haftar. However, when the media revealed their presence, they were recalled to Sudan after only three months and limited fighting, in spite of Emirati pressure for them to stay.²⁸ Among the reasons for their withdrawal were social media criticism of the RSF and the fact that Darfuri rebels already in Libya were not prepared to fight alongside the RSF (there was a risk that these rebels would instead fight the RSF inside Libya and spoil the Juba talks). Despite repeated Emirati demands, Hemetti has apparently refused to send forces to Libya without an international framework akin to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, although unconfirmed reports suggested some troops were deployed to Libya in 2020.²⁹

Between late 2020 and early 2022, the simultaneous Sudanese and Libyan peace processes encouraged the return of Darfuri rebels from Libya to Sudan. Notably, under US pressure, financial support once given to them by Haftar and his UAE backers decreased, pushing the majority of the Juba signatory groups to leave Libya. The move responded not only to growing international pressure for foreign troops to leave Libya but also to the rebel leaders' need to swell their ranks in the context of both the implementation of the Juba agreement's security arrangements and the instability that followed the October 2021 coup. Mostly Zaghawa combatants appeared to be willing to return to Darfur in the context of growing violence, whether to protect their community or to take part in clashes. Remaining rebels, including non-signatory groups, were pressured to relocate to remote locations in the Libyan desert. Signatory groups also maintained some troops in Libya to ensure the delivery of fuel and food to Darfur, where they lack the supplies that should have been provided to them by the Sudanese government, per the Juba agreement. The lack of full implementation of the agreement, not least its security arrangements, may push some rebels to return to Libya.

Conclusion

The FFC's initial mistake was to ignore Sudan's historic peripheries, notably Darfur. This neglect continued the Bashir regime's marginalization policy. Darfur's protracted lack of representation in and consultation with the civilian-led government in Khartoum fueled Hemetti's ascent above other Darfuri actors and led to parallel political processes, such as the Juba peace talks, and ultimately contributed to the October 2021 coup. At the same time, Darfur faces significant challenges—including ongoing threats to civilian security—that are both connected to and distinct from the

overarching political transition in Sudan. To prevent further violence, metropolitan political elites must overcome their persistent fear of and hostility toward the peripheries and demonstrate that they are not interested in reproducing the problems of the Bashir years, including Khartoum's violent hegemony over the rest of the country. So far, this elitist bias has compelled some Darfuri rebels to align with Hemetti, their former foe, and, even more unnaturally, to support the latest coup.

Many Sudanese civilian and military actors regard Hemetti's internal and external influence as a potential threat to the staying power of Sudan's "traditional" postcolonial powerbrokers, whether military officers or civilian politicians, regardless of their ideological differences. Some are afraid of what they perceive as Hemetti's attempt to form a bloc of the geographic and ethnic peripheries of Sudan that challenges the elitist Sudanese state. For some, such as a Darfuri politician interviewed for this report prior to the 2021 coup, the Juba "peace process is just preparation for a coming war" between the center and peripheries, as has occurred repeatedly in Sudan's history. Regardless of the military-civilian confrontation, some from Darfur share that analysis or expect that such a war is likely if Darfur and other marginalized areas remain on the sidelines of Sudanese politics. As another Darfuri politician warned, if the "revolution's expectations are not fulfilled in Darfur, there risks [being] another rebellion, with new faces: those of once-peaceful protesters."

Avoiding more war is in the interests not only of the civilians in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan, who will suffer most from the fighting, but also of Western actors concerned about instability and its impact on terrorism, migration, and economies in a region already plagued by bad governance and the COVID-19 pandemic. France is particularly concerned about avoiding more instability in the Sahelian belt (that runs from Mauritania to Sudan), given France's ties to Chad and other states in the Sahel and its involvement in fighting terrorism in the region. The United States, too, would like to see Sudan not following the same trend toward civil war and authoritarianism affecting some key allies in the Horn of Africa—notably, Ethiopia and South Sudan. For Western players, who for many years focused on security and stability to the detriment of democratization, Sudan's military-civilian transitional arrangements represented a fragile but hopeful exception in the region.

The leverage available to these Western actors is not enormous, but neither is it negligible. Al-Burhan, Hemetti, and Darfuri rebel leaders are all, to varying extents, interested in securing political and economic support from the United States and Europe, as well as in maintaining good relations with key allies of the West (including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel). Some of Sudan's neighbors, in particular Chad, would like to continue to receive similar Western support for playing the roles of regional stabilizer in the region and intermediary with armed players in Darfur. This leverage could be employed in pursuit of at least three goals that, individually and collectively, would enhance the prospects of Sudan enjoying greater peace and stability in the future.

The first of these goals is to persuade the SAF, the RSF, and Darfuri rebels to pay more attention to the interests and demands of civilians and to welcome (or at least accept), rather than obstruct, the return of control of government to civilian leaders. Western policymakers can help foster greater receptivity to civilian concerns by agreeing among themselves and with their regional allies on coordinated policies that combine economic pressure, sanctions, and condemnation of government violence against civilians with encouragement for negotiations between prodemocratic politicians in Khartoum and the military, as well as Darfuri rebels. Those negotiations should be conducted on the basis of two documents drawn up since Bashir's fall:

the constitutional charter and the Juba agreement. Contradictions between those should be reconciled, and neither should be abandoned to the detriment of the other. Civilian politicians from the center should be encouraged to integrate Darfuri demands for peace, justice, and redistribution of wealth and power, including those in the Juba agreement, into their political agenda; and Darfuri rebel leaders should be urged to pay attention to civilian demands voiced both by pro-democracy protesters in Khartoum and by their own constituencies in Darfur.

A second goal is to encourage Hemetti and the RSF as a whole to abandon their pro-Arab agenda and instead embrace a more inclusive approach, one that regards both Arabs and non-Arabs from Sudan's peripheries as equally in need of better representation at the national level. This will be challenging, however, because Darfuri Arab leaders are not entirely supportive of Hemetti's stated ambitions to enlarge his support base within Darfur and to make the RSF more diverse. These Arab leaders and their supporters may now feel both emboldened by the coup and threatened by the Juba peace agreement. Efforts to implement the deal and resolve tensions over land may result in new violence, particularly if the government forces involved are not neutral actors. Similarly, any attempt to change the ethnic composition of government forces, including the RSF, will not result in sufficient change within the military if the RSF does not distance itself from the pro-Arab agenda that led to the creation of the janjawid and to the war in Darfur.

A third goal is to minimize the disruptive effects of Sudan's new crisis on the wider region, including a possible renewed spread of Sudan's violence into Chad. External actors can reduce this risk by sending clear messages to various regional powerbrokers, condemning their attempts to consolidate authoritarian, military, or dynastic regimes at home or abroad and opposing the current epidemic of undemocratic change in the region. Taken as a whole, Sudan's regional politics are in flux. For some states in the region and beyond—among them, China, Russia, and Israel—Sudan's different possible trajectories since the October 2021 coup offer opportunities to strengthen their influence and to help their favored Sudanese leaders grow more powerful. These regional power games contributed to destabilizing the transition, and they now risk perpetuating Sudan's status as an ethno-political battleground. At the same time, the new configuration of Sudanese politics may have consequential impacts for the country's neighbors. Only time will tell whether the unfolding struggles for power and influence within Sudan will provide greater opportunities for conflict resolution in the region or will engender further regional destabilization.

Notes

1. Some interviewees asked, for security reasons, not to be cited by name in this report.
2. Victor Tanner and Jérôme Tubiana, “Divided They Fall: The Fragmentation of Darfur’s Rebel Groups,” HSBA Working Paper no. 6, Small Arms Survey, July 2007, www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/working-papers/HSBA-WP-06-Darfur-rebels.pdf.
3. International Federation for Human Rights, “Sudan: Violent Crackdown on Protesters Requires Urgent Action by International Community,” press release, June 5, 2019, www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/sudan/sudan-violent-crackdown-on-protesters-requires-urgent-action-by.
4. The transition was initially supposed to last 39 months, with a shift from military to civilian leadership of the Sovereignty Council after 21 months (on May 17, 2021). The October 2020 Juba peace agreement reset the transition’s clock, allowing al-Burhan to chair the council until July 2022. Some civilian politicians insisted that the shift occur in November 2021, a demand that may have precipitated the coup.
5. Jérôme Tubiana, “‘The Revolution Was Hijacked’: Inside the Conflict in Darfur,” *Al Jazeera*, July 6, 2021, www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/7/6/the-revolution-was-hijacked-inside-the-conflict-in-darfur.
6. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Inter-communal Violence Increased in Darfur during the Second Half of 2020,” January 17, 2021, <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/card/1R5yoxqxpR>.
7. FIDH and the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies, “Delays and Dilemmas: New Violence in Darfur and Uncertain Justice Efforts within Sudan’s Fragile Transition,” November 2021, www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/fidh_report_sudan2021.pdf; United Nations Security Council, “Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan,” S/2021/40, January 13, 2021, <https://undocs.org/S/2021/40>; and Jérôme Tubiana, “Darfur Is Bleeding Again,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 25, 2021, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2021-05-25/darfur-war-sudan-new-government.
8. This process of Arabization began before colonial times but accelerated under Bashir, as various Sudanese communities, including parts of the Fellata community (who were originally Pula from West Africa), gradually adopted an Arabic identity.
9. Declan Walsh, “The Dictator Who Waged War on Darfur Is Gone, but the Killing Goes On,” *New York Times*, July 30, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/world/middleeast/darfur-sudan.html.
10. Walsh, “The Dictator Who Waged War on Darfur Is Gone.”
11. *Janjawid*, literally “devil’s horsemen,” a nickname initially applied to Arab road bandits and livestock rustlers, was given to the militias recruited by the government against the Darfur insurgency, who included some of the original outlaw janjawid. The janjawid initially operated on horses and camels before being equipped with pickup trucks and gradually integrated into paramilitary forces such as the Popular Defence Forces, the Border Guard, the Central Reserve Police, and the RSF. See Jérôme Tubiana, “Remote-Control Breakdown: Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and Pro-government Militias,” HSBA Issue Brief no. 27, Small Arms Survey, April 2017, www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/HSBA-IB-27-Sudanese-paramilitary-forces.pdf.
12. The large Rizeigat tribe, present in both Darfur and Chad, has among its larger subgroups the Mahariya (Hemetti’s subgroup) and the Mahamid (Hilal’s subgroup).
13. Jérôme Tubiana, “The Small War in Eastern Chad,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 18, 2016, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/chad/2016-10-18/small-war-eastern-chad.
14. On al-Hilu’s Masalit connection, see Claudio Gramizzi and Jérôme Tubiana, “Forgotten Darfur: Old Tactics and New Players,” HSBA Working Paper no. 28, Small Arms Survey, July 2012, 76–80, www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/working-papers/HSBA-WP-28-Forgotten-Darfur.pdf.
15. United Nations Security Council, “Situation in the Sudan and the Activities of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in the Sudan,” S/2021/1008, December 3, 2021, 4, <https://undocs.org/S/2021/1008>.
16. “Sudan Govt, SPLM-N El Hilu Agreement in Addis Ababa—Rebels to Retain Arms,” Dabanga, September 4, 2020, www.dabanga.sudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-govt-splm-n-el-hilu-agreement-in-addis-ababa-rebels-to-retain-arms.
17. Jérôme Tubiana, “In Darfur,” *London Review of Books*, June 3, 2021, www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n11/jerome-tubiana/diary.
18. “Sudan’s Prime Minister Warns of Risk of Chaos, Civil War,” Reuters, June 16, 2021, www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudans-prime-minister-warns-risk-chaos-civil-war-2021-06-15.
19. The committee in question is the Empowerment [or *tamkin*, from the term used by the Bashir regime for its policy of consolidation or empowerment of the Islamists] Elimination, Anti-Corruption and Funds Recovery Committee.
20. United Nations Security Council, “Situation in the Sudan,” 5.
21. The connotation implied is a parallel with white supremacy, with an agenda of domination of the land but also segregation/apartheid.

22. In western Sudan in the 1980s, a movement known as the “Arab Gathering” referred to both Gadhafi and Chadian Arab rebels as its “godfathers.” Its ideas and leaders were considered to be at the origin of the formation of the janjawid militias in Darfur. Some of them appear now to support Hemetti, seeing him as the enforcer of their agenda. Their opponents believe that the same supremacist agenda, aiming at promoting Arab supremacy in Sudan, Chad, Niger, and Libya, may unite players as diverse as Hemetti, Chadian Arab rebels, Haftar’s Libyan Arab Armed Forces and their UAE backers, and Niger’s new president Mohamed Bazoum.
23. Jérôme Tubiana and Marielle Debos, “Déby’s Chad: Political Manipulation at Home, Military Intervention Abroad, Challenging Times Ahead,” *Peaceworks* no. 136, United States Institute of Peace, December 2017, 20–22, www.usip.org/publications/2017/12/debys-chad.
24. Jérôme Tubiana, “How France Undermines Democracy in Chad,” *Foreign Policy*, May 24, 2021, www.foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/24/france-macron-chad-deby-democracy-g5-sahel.
25. Cyril Bensimon, “Au Tchad, la peur d’un vent de révolte soudanais” [In Chad, the Fear of a Wind of Sudanese Revolt], *Le Monde*, June 26, 2019, www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/06/26/au-tchad-la-peur-d-un-vent-de-revolte-soudanais_5481690_3212.html.
26. In addition to Chad, the G5-Sahel includes Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.
27. Jérôme Tubiana, Clotilde Warin, and Mahamat Saleh Mangare, “Diaspora in Despair: Darfurian Mobility at a Time of International Disengagement,” *Small Arms Survey*, June 2020, www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/HSBA-Report-Darfur-mobility_1.pdf.
28. Radio Dabanga, “1,000 Sudanese Militiamen Arrive in Libya,” July 25, 2019, www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/1-000-sudanese-militiamen-arrive-in-libya.
29. United Nations Security Council, “Final Report of the Panel of Experts,” 24, 62.

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