

Between Tehran and Khartoum

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In April 2023 fighting broke out between Sudan's military (SAF) under the command of President Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under the command of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as "Hemedti."

After almost two years of war, the SAF announced full control of Sudan's tri-city capital on March 26, 2025.¹ The recapture of Khartoum city marks a watershed moment in the conflict and the SAF has now gained the upper hand.²

The war in Sudan has killed thousands of people, with some estimates placing the death toll as high as 28,000 and created a displacement crisis - with more than 11 million uprooted, according to the United Nations. Negotiations mediated by the US, Saudi Arabia and the African Union reached a deadlock.³

With the war in Sudan dragging on with no solution in sight, the conflict has regionalized and internationalized and foreign actors are hedging their bets on various factions in order to gain influence in the volatile country.⁴

Iran has become one of the main outside players in Sudan's internal conflict. Several factors explain Iran's reasons for supporting the SAF in this conflict:

Iran is interested in Sudan because of its strategic location on the Red Sea, where securing a foothold has been a priority of Iran for decades. Tehran's ultimate ambition is to have a direct naval presence in the Red Sea, allowing it to disrupt access to two of the world's critical shipping chokepoints – the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz.⁵

At a time in which the Red Sea is the theater of an ongoing war between Iran's Houthi proxy and the US led coalition and Israel, Iran seeks to secure greater influence in the Red Sea as a means of countering Israel and its Western backers.

Israel's military operations during the war of "Iron swords" against Hamas and Hezbollah and the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, have disrupted Iran's proxies (the "Axis of resistance") in the Middle East. Iran considers a success in gaining a foothold in Sudan as a compensation for its losses.

By supporting al-Burhan in this conflict, Iran is seeking to demonstrate to the Sudanese state and other countries in the region that even though good relations with

Tehran might not pay off financially compared to what Khartoum receives from GCC states, a partnership with Iran is valuable from a military and defense standpoint.⁶

Iran is interested in Sudan's uranium stockpiles to strengthen its nuclear program.

The Sudanese interests⁷

As al-Burhan fights an existential threat, the Sudanese general seeks as much help from anywhere he can obtain it. There is no denying that the SAF is materially benefiting from Sudan's renormalization of relations with Iran amid this armed conflict.

The restoration of diplomatic relations

Sudan broke off relations with Iran in 2016 in a show of solidarity with Saudi Arabia. In March 2023, however, Riyadh and Tehran announced the restoration of their relations following an agreement brokered by China. Iran has since moved to restore relations also with other neighboring Arab countries.⁸ Al Burhan reestablished relations with Iran after Iran improved relations with Saudi Arabia.

The two countries resumed their diplomatic ties in October 2023. The Sudanese government announced in October 2023 that Iran and Sudan "discussed restoring bilateral relations between the two countries and accelerating the steps to reopen embassies between them."⁹

The Sudanese government, announced in a statement on July 21, 2024 that Burhan had received Tehran's new ambassador Hassan Shah Hosseini in Port Sudan.¹⁰ This is "the beginning of a new phase in the course of bilateral relations between the two countries," foreign ministry undersecretary Hussein al-Amin said as Burhan sent off Sudan's new ambassador to Iran, Abdelaziz Hassan Saleh.¹¹

Recent relations between Sudan and Iran have included visits by Sudanese Finance Minister Jibril Ibrahim to Tehran in November 2024 and Iranian Assistant Minister for Economy and Finance visit in Port Sudan.¹²

On February 17, 2025, Sudanese Foreign Minister, Ali Youssif visited Tehran, where he met with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian, Speaker of Parliament Mohammad-Bagher Qalibaf, and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi. The Sudanese foreign minister conveyed warm greetings and a message from Chairman of Sudan's Sovereign Council Abdel Fattah al-Burhan to President Pezeshkian.¹³ President Pezeshkian expressed satisfaction with the resumption of the ties, and emphasized the importance of expanding bilateral relations.¹⁴ The Sudanese foreign minister expressed satisfaction with the restoration of relations between Tehran and Khartoum, saying that Sudan is willing to expand its relations with Iran in all fields. He also invited the Iranian president to visit Khartoum after calm is restored to the country.¹⁵

The Sudanese foreign minister told Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi that the Sudanese Armed Forces had taken the lead in the war against the RSF militia, which he claimed was backed by foreign entities seeking to seize power. He also briefed Araghchi on the “militia’s” violations.

During the visit, Iran's minister of foreign affairs, declared Iran’s support for the Sudanese government and army in their fight against the “rebel” RSF, emphasizing the need to stop foreign intervention in Sudan and promote national dialogue for internal reconciliation. ¹⁶ Araghchi also agreed to encourage Iranian companies to participate in Sudan’s reconstruction and the two parties also discussed technology exchange.¹⁷

Iran's "drone diplomacy"

Since December 2023, Iran has supplied the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) with weapons including drones. In early December 2023, a Boeing 747 passenger plane belonging to Iranian cargo carrier Qeshm Fars Air took off from Bandar Abbas airport in Iran and landed in Port Sudan airport. This flight was repeated five times until the end of January 2024, the same month the use of Iranian drones was documented in Sudan. The firm, Qeshm Fars Air, which is under US sanctions, is affiliated with the external operations arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).¹⁸ The Iranian authorities have also rented 17 apartments in Port Sudan, where SAF chief and Sudan’s de facto leader Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan relocated his government soon after fighting broke out in April 2023.¹⁹

Iran supplied Mohajer-6 drones to President Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his Sudanese Armed Forces. Since the appearance of drones in Sudan’s skies, the situation on the ground has partially changed and the Iranian drones have been vital to the SAF’s success in retaking Omdurman and Khartoum.²⁰

The leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo “Hemedti” attributed the SAF victory to Iranian drones, adding that "we will figure out a solution for those drones soon." He pledged to pursue fighting the SAF for 21 years "we are now fighting them for 21 months. We are capable of fighting them for yet 21 years and the balance will tilt in our favor".²¹

The drone exports to the SAF have been a part of Iran’s "drone diplomacy". Iran has delivered surveillance and attack drones not only to its nonstate proxies and partners in the Middle East – such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis in Yemen – but also to states outside the region such as Russia, Ethiopia, Venezuela and Tajikistan. Iran has done this to project power, strengthen alliances and influence conflicts in the Middle East and other regions. At the same time, it can prove a lucrative source of income for the Iranian economy, as well as a showcase for the country’s technology.²²

Sudan and the Abraham Accords

In October 2020, the transitional government of Sudan signed (but didn't ratify) a normalization agreement with Israel and in early 2021 Sudan agreed to begin normalizing relations with Israel. The move, which was mainly driven by Sudanese security and military officials, came after the US made Sudan's removal from its list of 'state sponsors of terrorism' conditional on the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel. In early 2023, then Israeli foreign minister Eli Cohen travelled to Khartoum in the first publicly acknowledged such visit.²³

Israel is concerned that Abraham Accords partner Sudan is growing close to Iran, as it looks for assistance amid the civil war that has roiled the country since 2023.

Al-Burhan wasn't looking specifically for assistance from Tehran but Sudan is forced to cooperate with any party interested in supplying it with weapons. Al-Burhan turned to Iran after growing disappointed in Israel's failure to come to his aid with military support as he had envisioned.²⁴

Iran will seek to use its clout with al-Burhan to try to pull Khartoum away from the normalization trend with Israel and towards a foreign policy more closely aligned with Tehran's interests.²⁵ Since then, Sudan adopted a more vocal stance in solidarity with Iran backed Hamas in the war with Israel.

Background - Sudan – Iran relations

Iran-Sudan relations date back to 1989, when Iran backed the coup led by Omar al-Bashir, who later became the president of Sudan. Throughout much of the rule of Omar al-Bashir and Hassan al Turabi the ideological nature of his regime was Islamist and some historians regard the Sudanese coup of 1989 as the first time that a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government took power in an Arab country. Sudan has a long history of hosting and supporting extremists and jihadists. During President Omar al-Bashir's regime, Sudan hosted Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda group (1991 – 1996), Hamas, Hezbollah, and the terrorist Carlos the Jackal.²⁶

Sudan under the rule of the Sudanese Islamic Movement led by Hassan al-Turabi and President Bashir since 1989–maintained a close relationship with Iran.

Sudan and Iran share geopolitical objectives, and Sudan was a strategic gateway for Iran into the African continent. The alliance between Sudan and Iran was strong for decades and Iran supplied financial and military support for Sudan.

Sudan recognized Iran's right to pursue a nuclear program and voted against U.N. General Assembly resolutions condemning Tehran's human rights record. From 1989 to 2021, Sudan ranked as Iran's third largest trading partner in Africa and accounted for 3% of its average annual trade with the continent.²⁷

During the nineties, the development of bilateral ties allowed Iran to emerge from its diplomatic isolation and find a strategic ally in the Arab world and in the key region of the Horn of Africa.²⁸

During the 1990s and 2000s, Iran offered military aid to Sudan and Iran helped Sudan in constructing an indigenous military-industry. Many Sudanese weapons were locally made versions of Iranian models including drones such as the Sajil-3 – a locally manufactured version of the Iranian Ababil-3 drone.²⁹

The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) operating an Iranian-origin Type 72Z main battle tank, also known as the T-72Z, Safir-74, or Al-Zubair I in Sudanese service. Sudan acquired the Type 72Z main battle tanks in 2006, and Sudan produced the tank under license as the Al-Zubair I.³⁰

The T-72Z is an Iranian upgrade program launched in 1996 to modernize aging fleets of T-54, T-55, and Type 59 tanks. The program was designed to provide a cost-effective solution for extending operational life while improving mobility, firepower, and protection. The tank's designation is not related to the Soviet T-72 series.³¹

During Bashir's reign, advisers from the Iranian army and the Revolutionary Guard had reportedly sent to Sudan to assist in the organization and training of paramilitary forces loyal to the regime.³²

On the other hand, the Sudanese regime has delivered weapons to Iranian-friendly insurgent groups in Africa and the Middle East, including Hamas and the Houthis in Yemen, who are fighting Saudi-backed forces.

In 2008, Sudanese and Iranian officials signed a military cooperation agreement, and in 2013, Iran stepped up its construction of naval and logistical bases in Port Sudan.³³ But between 2013 and 2016, Iran-Sudan relations suffered a series of severe setbacks. Perhaps early signs of Sudan's shift toward Saudi Arabia and the GCC — and away from Iran appeared in 2013:

In February 2013, Sudan and Saudi Arabia, had conducted their first joint naval exercise in Port Sudan.

In August 2013, Khartoum had provided Syrian rebels that fought against Assad forces and his Iranian allies in Syria, with Sudanese and Chinese manufactured weapons.

In September 2014, Sudanese authorities closed Iranian cultural centers in Khartoum and other locations, condemning Tehran's attempts to spread Shiism in Sudan. One month after the closures, Bashir sought to further distance Sudan from Iran, declaring that Riyadh's negative outlook on Khartoum's true relations with Tehran was based on "false, fabricated and exaggerated" information.

In 2015, Sudan then broke diplomatic ties with Iran after Saudi diplomatic sites in Tehran and Mashhad were attacked following Saudi Arabia's execution of Shia cleric and activist Nimr al-Nimr.

In 2015, Sudan joined Riyadh's coalition and in 2016, Sudan and other countries in the Horn of Africa cut formal ties with Tehran.³⁴

There was a brief period of hope for democracy when Sudanese took to the streets in 2018 to overthrow the military government of General Omar al Bashir. General Al-Burhan was primarily responsible for al-Bashir's overthrow in 2019 following months of a popular grassroots-led uprising against the dictatorship. But since then, the country's hopes for a peaceful transition to democracy have been dashed.³⁵

Sudan and the war in Yemen

Sudan participated with about 2000 troops in the Saudi-led "Decisive Storm" coalition against the Iranian-allied Houthi militants in Yemen. Sudan also deployed at least two Su-24M strike aircraft to Saudi Arabia's King Khalid Air Base.

In October 2015, Sudanese Defense Minister Awad bin Auf said, "There are 6,000 fighters from special forces, ground forces and elite troops ready to participate when requested by the leadership of the coalition. ... Even if more troops and military contribution is needed, we are ready for any developments."³⁶

Sudan was the only country outside the Gulf region directly participated in the ground campaign against Houthi rebels. Khartoum's army had a lot of experience fighting unconventional foes during which it earned a special reputation for brutality.

Summary

In 2015, the president of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir has switched alliances, joining ranks with Saudi Arabia, after nearly two decades of strained ties. As a part of the alliance, Sudan has cut diplomatic relations with Iran and joined the Saudi led coalition against the Houthi rebels backed by Iran in Yemen.

The current civil war in Sudan has provided an opportunity for Iran to regain influence in the country. Tehran is supporting al-Burhan and the SAF win the war and take back control of the state. Arming the SAF helps both Iran's wider geopolitical goals in the region and its competition with regional rivals, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Israel.

Israel's military achievements in the war of "Iron swords" against Hamas and Hezbollah and the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, have disrupted Iran's "Axis of resistance" in the Middle East. Iran considers a success in gaining a foothold in Sudan as a compensation for its losses.

Iran controls the strategic Hormuz straits and its Houthi proxy controls the strategic Bab al Mandeb strait and part of the Eastern coast of the Red Sea. An Iranian foothold

in Sudan along the Western coast of the Red Sea will turn Iran to be the dominant power in the Red Sea region.

Iran has already demonstrated its ability to disrupt the shipping in the Red Sea and the attacks on shipping from the Houthis forced shipping companies to divert trade to the Cape of Good Hope.

The ongoing fighting between the US-led coalition forces and the Houthis since November 2023 demonstrates the difficulty of ensuring freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, and therefore a direct establishment of Iran in Sudan could further aggravate the strategic threat in the region. Therefore, the US and its allies must act decisively to prevent Iran from establishing military and naval forces in Sudan.

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