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## **Between Tehran and Port Sudan**

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Sudanese and Iranian officials have agreed to expedite their steps to resume relations and restore diplomatic representation. The recent rapprochement raised questions about the reasons for that path amid the civil war in Sudan and the regional conflict between the Iranian backed Houthis and Israel the US and its allies that erupted when Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, killing more than 1,200 people.<sup>1</sup>

Meeting with ambassadors in Port Sudan in February 2024, Sudanese Foreign Minister Ali Al-Sadiq reaffirmed the neutrality of his country's newly restored diplomatic relations with Iran, stating that the move is "normal" and not intended to target any specific nation or group.<sup>2</sup>

Iran and Sudan agreed on October 9, 2023, to restore diplomatic relations and on January 20, 2024, the governments have agreed to speed up restoring diplomatic representation and reopening embassies in their respective countries.

Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi met with Sudanese Foreign Minister Ali Al-Sadiq in Tehran on February 5, 2024. The encounter marked the first official Sudanese visit to Iran since the two countries' diplomatic rift ended after seven years.<sup>3</sup>

Sudan cut diplomatic ties with Iran in 2016 following the storming of the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran. Before the diplomatic rift, Iran had

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provided significant military support to the Sudanese government under former President Omer al-Bashir.<sup>4</sup>

The ongoing civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under the command of Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known in Sudan as "Hemedti" has created a vacuum, attracting the attention of various countries vying for influence in the region.<sup>5</sup>

Sudan is a Red Sea country with maritime borders extending to about 670 km. Tehran's backing for Sudan's army is aimed at strengthening ties with the strategically located country. *In controlling Sudanese ports, Iran and its allies would gain a foothold in a critically important commercial corridor with proximity to Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Israel.*<sup>6</sup>

For Sudan's army, weapons are the main motive for restoring relations with Iran that already providing the Sudanese army with drones the army needs to continue its battles against the Rapid Support Forces.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, Iran's attempt to establish a permanent naval base on Sudan's Red Sea coast was rejected, but it underscores the strategic importance of Sudan, particularly its Red Sea coastline.

### **The Iranian arms supply to Sudan**

The RSF said the Sudanese army was receiving deliveries of Iranian Mohajer-4, Mohajer-6 and Ababil drones and other arms from Iran to Port Sudan. The Mohajer and Ababil drones are made by companies operating under Iran's Ministry of Defense. The RSF said it had shot down several of the drones.<sup>8</sup>

The Iranian Mohajer and Ababil drones had been transported to Sudan by Iran's Qeshm Fars Air. Flight tracking records show that in December 2023 and January 2024, a Boeing 747-200 cargo plane operated by Qeshm Fars Air made six journeys from Iran to Port Sudan. Qeshm Fars Air is under U.S. sanctions.<sup>9</sup>

In February 2023, the U.S. voiced concern over Iranian arms shipments to the Sudanese army. John Godfrey, the U.S. ambassador to Sudan at the time, said reports of Iranian aid to Khartoum are "very troubling and a source of great concern for us."<sup>10</sup>

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A U.S. State Department spokesperson said the U.S. had seen the reports on Iranian support for the army and was monitoring the situation. "The United States opposes external involvement to support the Sudan conflict – it will only exacerbate and prolong the conflict and risks further spreading regional instability," the spokesperson said.<sup>11</sup>

Sourcing weapons from Iran could complicate relations for the SAF with the United States. Asked about Iranian drones, Sudan's acting foreign minister, Ali Sadeq, said that Sudan did not obtain any weapons from Iran.<sup>12</sup>

### **Iranian naval base in the Red Sea**

Iran unsuccessfully pressed Sudan to let it build a permanent naval base on the country's Red Sea coast. *The Iranians wanted to station warships there and to use the base for intelligence gathering.*<sup>13</sup>

Sudanese military chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan refused the Iranian request citing concerns about potentially alienating the United States and Israel, with whom the country has recently sought to improve relations.<sup>14</sup> Deeper Iranian ties may also definitively end the US-backed prospect of Sudan fully normalizing relations with Israel, an initiative already derailed by the civil war.<sup>15</sup>

A naval base on the Red Sea would allow Iran to tighten its grip on one of the world's busiest shipping lanes and to monitor maritime traffic of Iran's regional rivals, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

Iran is helping Yemen-based Houthi rebels launch attacks on commercial and military vessels in the Red Sea. Iran and the Houthis say the attacks are aimed at punishing Israel and its allies for the fighting in Gaza.<sup>16</sup>

A U.S.-led multinational force has been deployed to protect seaborne traffic. Iran has been sending increasingly sophisticated weapons to its Houthi allies in Yemen, enhancing their ability to attack vessels and disrupt international commerce despite of U.S. led airstrikes.

### **The civil war in Sudan (2023 – 2024)**

Sudan currently is in the midst of a devastating civil war. Sudan's military under the command of Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan has been fighting the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by

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Burhan's former second-in-command, Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known in Sudan as "Hemedti").

The RSF was established by Omar al-Bashir. Fearing a potential military coup, al-Bashir adopted the RSF to defend his regime. But the group's leader, Hemedti, quadrupled his forces within a few years to about 100,000 soldiers, roughly the same as the SAF.

Fighting between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) erupted on April 15, 2023, over tensions linked to a planned transition to civilian rule. It has devastated the capital Khartoum and sparked ethnically driven attacks in Darfur.<sup>17</sup>

The RSF took over strategic sites in the capital Khartoum in the first months of the war. Within Khartoum, the RSF has launched attacks on several army bases, including the main army headquarters and the armored corps base. Across the Nile in Omdurman, the RSF used long-range artillery, to attack the crucial Wadi Saydina air force base. The RSF also took control of Ailafoun, a major town on one of the routes to Madani and attacked Nyala and El Obeid to the west of Khartoum. The RSF also moved southward, towards Gezira state, a key agricultural area and population center.<sup>18</sup>

The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) Commander, Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, made Port Sudan in the east of the country his capital. He faces accusations of being supported by Islamist leaders from the previous regime of Omar al Bashir.<sup>19</sup>

The SAF used some old UAVs in the first months of the war alongside artillery batteries and fighter jets but had little success in rooting out RSF fighters embedded in heavily populated neighborhoods in Khartoum and other cities.<sup>20</sup>

Iranian-made armed drones have helped the SAF to turn the tide of the conflict, halting the progress of the rival Rapid Support Force and regaining territory around the capital. In January 2024, much more effective drones began operating from the army's Wadi Sayidna base to the north of Khartoum.<sup>21</sup>

The drones appeared to monitor RSF movements, target their positions, and pinpoint artillery strikes which forced the RSF to flee from many areas and allowed the army to deploy forces on the ground. In April 2024 the Sudanese army has regained control of important areas of Khartoum

and Omdurman and the RSF acknowledged it had suffered setbacks in Omdurman.<sup>22</sup>

U.N. experts have said the RSF war effort has been aided by backing via neighboring African states including Chad, Libya and South Sudan, and that allegations of material support from the United Arab Emirates to the RSF were credible. The U.A.E. has denied making any such deliveries.<sup>23</sup>

In December 2023, the government of Sudan demanded that 15 Emirati diplomats leave the country after an army commander accused Abu Dhabi of supporting the RSF, and protests in Port Sudan demanded the expulsion of the UAE ambassador.<sup>24</sup>

On April 26, 2024, Sudan has called for an emergency UN Security Council meeting on what it calls UAE “aggression” for allegedly supporting the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Sudan’s UN representative, Al-Harith Idriss, had submitted the request.<sup>25</sup>

In a letter to the Security Council the UAE foreign ministry rejected Sudan’s accusations that it backs the RSF. The letter said the allegations were “spurious (and) unfounded, and lack any credible evidence to support them”.<sup>26</sup>

Following the war between the SAF and RSF, the US government has mostly focused on promoting its partner Saudi Arabia as a mediator of the conflict.<sup>27</sup> After the suspension of the Jeddah platform and the halt of negotiations to end the war following the Sudanese government's rejection of the IGAD initiative, which it described as "biased towards the Rapid Support and its leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo," the war in Sudan dragging on with no solution in sight and foreign actors are hedging their bets on various factions to gain influence in the volatile country.<sup>28</sup>

Now, *Sudan’s biggest concern is the humanitarian crisis* caused by the war, which has displaced more than 8.5 million people, killed tens of thousands, destroyed major cities, and triggered one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises.<sup>29</sup>

The war is gravely affecting the medical sector and food security. As 70 percent of the health sector in Sudan is non-operational, many people die due to lack of medical care and medicine, even in regions not directly affected by the war. The food sector in Sudan has almost collapsed and according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), the

war in Sudan has driven 17.7 million people into acute food insecurity. Power cuts and lack of water are widespread.<sup>30</sup>

### **The relations between Iran and Sudan (1989 – 2023)**

Sudan under the rule of the Sudanese Islamic Movement led by Hassan al Turabi and President Bashir since 1989 had close ties with Iran and its allies.

Iran and Sudan in 2007 signed a mutual defense agreement after which there were increased sales of Iranian missiles and drones to Khartoum. Iran also had a significant role in Sudan's weapons industry, using a major manufacturing facility in Khartoum to produce armaments under joint military programs with Iran.<sup>31</sup> *Sudan has also a history of hosting extremists and jihadists groups and Iran used Sudanese territory to smuggle weapons into Gaza.*<sup>32</sup>

Cooperation between Sudan and Iran was strong until President Bashir turned to Iran's Gulf rivals for economic support, joined the Saudi led coalition against the Iranian backed Houthis in Yemen in 2015 and cut the relations with Tehran in 2016.

After Bashir was ousted in a 2019 popular uprising, Sudan's military-led transitional government rushed to rebuild ties with the West and salvage the economy. The leader of the country's military junta, Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, initiated a rapprochement with the U.S. to end international sanctions. He also moved to normalize relations with Israel.

Iran was ready to restore relations with Sudan after the fall of President Omar Al-Bashir's regime. However, the transitional government headed by al-Burhan, and Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok did not want to take the step.<sup>33</sup>

Most of that pro – western progress was destroyed when conflict erupted in April 2023 between Sudan's military and the RSF militia and paved the way for the comeback of Iran.

## Summary

The civil war in Sudan has displaced more than 8.5 million people, killed tens of thousands of people, destroyed major cities, and triggered one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

Months after mediators suspended negotiations, there appears to be no clear winner and no end in sight to the war and experts have evoked the danger that *Burhan and Hemedti establish rival spheres of control in Sudan like the situation in Libya*. In Libya an ongoing rivalry between various political and military factions has created a fragmented state with two rival governments locked in a stalemate.

*The rivalry between Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti") is not just a domestic problem but has taken a regional dimension. The Sudan war is becoming a proxy war and the interests of regional actors including Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt, as well as the big powers, US, and China, play an increasingly important role.*

Iran's request to build a naval base in Sudan highlights how regional powers are seeking to take advantage of Sudan's civil war to gain a foothold in the country, a strategic crossroads between the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa with a 670 km Red Sea coastline.

The war in Sudan might affect neighboring countries or even the whole region and mediation and more pressure on the two generals to end the fighting needed to end the Sudan war and to prevent escalation.

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Mohamed Amin Yassin, what is Sudan's Purpose of Diplomatic Approach with Iran? Asharq Al Awsat, January 22, 2024. <https://english.aawsat.com/features/4805441-what-sudans-purpose-diplomatic-approach-iran>

<sup>2</sup> Sudanese FM says relations with Iran are not directed against any country, Sudan tribune, February 14, 2024. <https://sudantribune.com/article282281/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Sudan, Iran to reopen embassies following diplomatic rapprochement Sudan tribune, January 20, 2024. <https://sudantribune.com/article281519/>



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<sup>5</sup> Sudan rejects Iran's bid for Red Sea naval base, Sudan tribune, April 24, 2024. <https://sudantribune.com/article282831/>

<sup>6</sup> Areej Elhaj, Iran in Sudan: Fears of a Sudanese Popular Mobilization Forces, The Washington institute, January 31, 2024. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-sudan-fears-sudanese-popular-mobilization-forces>

<sup>7</sup> Iran asked Sudan to allow a Naval Base on its Red Sea coast, The Jerusalem post, March 4, 2024. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-790192>

<sup>8</sup> Khalid Abdelaziz, Parisa Hafezi, and Aidan Lewis, Sudan civil war: are Iranian drones helping the army gain ground? Reuters, April 10, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/are-iranian-drones-turning-tide-sudans-civil-war-2024-04-10/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Iran Tried to Persuade Sudan to Allow Naval Base on Its Red Sea Coast, the wall street journal, March 3, 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-trying-to-persuade-sudan-to-allow-naval-base-on-its-red-sea-coast-77ca3922>

<sup>11</sup> Khalid Abdelaziz, Parisa Hafezi, and Aidan Lewis, Sudan civil war: are Iranian drones helping the army gain ground? Reuters, April 10, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/are-iranian-drones-turning-tide-sudans-civil-war-2024-04-10/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Iran Tried to Persuade Sudan to Allow Naval Base on Its Red Sea Coast, the wall street journal, March 3, 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-trying-to-persuade-sudan-to-allow-naval-base-on-its-red-sea-coast-77ca3922>

<sup>14</sup> Sudan rejects Iran's bid for Red Sea naval base, Sudan tribune, April 24, 2024. <https://sudantribune.com/article282831/>

<sup>15</sup> Iran-Sudan military rapprochement threatens to deepen six-month-old deadly civil war, Al Arabiya, October 26, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/26/Iran-Sudan-military-rapprochement-threatens-to-deepen>

<sup>16</sup> Iran Tried to Persuade Sudan to Allow Naval Base on Its Red Sea Coast, the wall street journal, March 3, 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-trying-to-persuade-sudan-to-allow-naval-base-on-its-red-sea-coast-77ca3922>

<sup>17</sup> Sudan's paramilitary RSF advances, aims to cement control, Al Arabiya, October 18, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/18/Sudan-s-paramilitary-RSF-advances-aims-to-cement-contr>

<sup>18</sup> Sudan's paramilitary RSF advances, aims to cement control, Al Arabiya, October 18, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/18/Sudan-s-paramilitary-RSF-advances-aims-to-cement-contr>



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<sup>19</sup> Islamists were working to exploit the relationship with Iran, aiming to weaponize the army. <https://english.aawsat.com/features/4805441-what-sudans-purpose-diplomatic-approach-iran>

<sup>20</sup> Khalid Abdelaziz, Parisa Hafezi, and Aidan Lewis, Sudan civil war: are Iranian drones helping the army gain ground? Reuters, April 10, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/are-iranian-drones-turning-tide-sudans-civil-war-2024-04-10/>

<sup>21</sup> A Mohajer-6 drone appeared on the runway at the Wadi Sayidna base in a satellite photograph dated January 9, 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Iran Tried to Persuade Sudan to Allow Naval Base on Its Red Sea Coast, the wall street journal, March 3, 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-tried-to-persuade-sudan-to-allow-naval-base-on-its-red-sea-coast-77ca3922>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Sudan demands emergency UN meeting on UAE 'aggression', The frontier post, April 27, 2024. <https://thefrontierpost.com/sudan-demands-emergency-un-meeting-on-uae-aggression/>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Jana Treffler, How the Gaza war impacts the war in Sudan, Ahram online, December 22, 2023. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/26/1259/514467/War-in-Sudan/War-in-Sudan/How-the-Gaza-war-imp>

<sup>28</sup> Areej Elhaj, Iran in Sudan: Fears of a Sudanese Popular Mobilization Forces, The Washington institute, January 31, 2024. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-sudan-fears-sudanese-popular-mobilization-forces>

<sup>29</sup> Sudan's paramilitary RSF advances, aims to cement control, Al Arabiya, October 18, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/18/Sudan-s-paramilitary-RSF-advances-aims-to-cement-contr>

<sup>30</sup> Jana Treffler, How the Gaza war impacts the war in Sudan, Ahram online, December 22, 2023. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/26/1259/514467/War-in-Sudan/War-in-Sudan/How-the-Gaza-war-imp>

<sup>31</sup> Iran-Sudan military rapprochement threatens to deepen six-month-old deadly civil war, Al Arabiya, October 26, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/26/Iran-Sudan-military-rapprochement-threatens-to-deepen>

<sup>32</sup> Iran asked Sudan to allow a Naval Base on its Red Sea coast, The Jerusalem post, March 4, 2024. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-790192>

<sup>33</sup> Mohamed Amin Yassin, what is Sudan's Purpose of Diplomatic Approach with Iran? Asharq Al Awsat, January 22, 2024. <https://english.aawsat.com/features/4805441-what-sudans-purpose-diplomatic-approach-iran>

