

POLICY MEMO

America's Best Choice in Sudan Is the Least Bad Option

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Long-simmering tensions between Sudan's two most powerful generals broke into open warfare on April 15. A series of ceasefires have failed, and fighting continues in the capital city, Khartoum, and in other areas throughout the country.

Street protests in April 2019 prompted Sudan's security services to oust the former dictator, Omar al-Bashir, and forced them to include civilians in the subsequent transitional government. Ever since, the United States has tried to help those civilians consolidate power.¹ In October 2021, however, the two most senior generals in the transitional government—Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (usually known as “Hemeti”), leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, leader of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF)—forced the civilians out.

Still, the United States supported negotiations between the junta and elements of the civilian protest movement until both

generals' desire for supreme power forced the confrontation that now threatens to dismember the country.

The Prospect of a Long Conflict and Its Dangers

The record and nature of Hemeti and Burhan, along with the dynamics of the current fighting, suggest this will be a prolonged conflict. The opposing forces have different strengths but are evenly matched after weeks of combat. Both generals have repeatedly demonstrated their ambition to control Sudan, and there is no indication that they will participate in good-faith negotiations to end the fighting.

The longer the conflict continues, the more the Sudanese people and American interests will suffer. Sudan's numerous other armed groups will likely renew or escalate their struggles, which might lead to a Libya-style outcome where the country is a patchwork of competing armed groups. Tribal violence

has also already intensified in places like Darfur, with ordinary people arming themselves to protect against rival tribes' raids.²

Furthermore, given Sudan's history of harboring al-Qaeda, some of the many Sudanese Islamists probably still have links to the group, raising the prospect that it could rebuild there under the cover of chaos. Sudanese Islamists themselves might resort to terrorism to try to claw back power. Or, despite the disdain many young Sudanese have for the Islamists after decades of misrule,³ the Sudanese people might decide that Islamist control is preferable to the bedlam that Burhan and Hemeti have ushered in.

Finally, if the fighting continues, countries like Russia that have interests in Sudan will likely bend the situation to their advantage. If the US does not act assertively, another country eventually will, and potentially tilt the situation onto a path that will make US attempts to influence events in its favor much harder.

American Interests and Options

The US has four core interests in Sudan. First, Washington wishes to keep its competitors from exploiting the conflict. The most serious threat is Russia, which has tried for years to gain a base in Port Sudan, which would give Moscow a commanding presence on a critical international shipping route. Russian Wagner mercenaries are also active in the country, including in the lucrative illegal gold trade that may help fund Russia's war against Ukraine.⁴

Second, the US does not want Islamists, who dominated Sudan during the time of Bashir, to return to power. They orchestrated grave rights abuses throughout the country,⁵ and, in addition to harboring al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, cooperated with Iran to supply Hamas with weapons for attacks against Israel.⁶

Third, the US wishes to prevent a region-threatening meltdown with the attendant humanitarian disaster. Sudan is a country of

46 million people surrounded by dysfunctional states like the Central African Republic, Libya, and South Sudan, and by the likes of Chad and Egypt, which cooperate with Washington on important issues. A sustained conflict would lead to a large movement of refugees and weapons, as well as economic and social disruptions. These developments would destabilize multiple countries and cause immense human suffering that the US wants to avoid.

Fourth, Washington wants to help a civilian-led, democratic government in Sudan take power, as it would be a more natural American partner than yet another authoritarian system of the kind that has caused the US so many problems in the past.

Since 2019, Washington has centered its diplomacy on helping civilians gain decisive power in government. The current fighting has devastated those efforts, and now the US is instead pushing for a meaningful ceasefire and peace talks. While a ceasefire to allow civilians out and humanitarian aid in is worthwhile, trying to force the generals to the negotiating table is unworkable. As long as they are not committed to a peaceful resolution, talks between them would be a distraction, potentially counterproductive, and a waste of diplomatic resources and energy. Lobbying for a doomed process also hurts American credibility.

The US could try to coerce the parties by threatening their economic empires. Degrading their ability to buy weapons and pay their fighters is worthwhile, but Washington likely cannot construct a sanctions regime watertight enough to change the generals' calculations. In fact, there are already sanctioned entities linked to Russia in Sudan that continue to thrive.⁷ Such a course would depend on strict cooperation from countries like the United Arab Emirates that have been lax in enforcing sanctions against Iran and Russia, which are high-priority American programs.⁸ Furthermore, strong-arming the UAE to comply would risk further straining relations with an important Persian Gulf country tilting toward China.⁹

The US is left with a menu of choices ranging from bad to terrible. Generals Burhan and Hemeti are both ambitious and brutal men who have plunged their country into a ruinous war. Yet given that the conflict appears to be developing into a long stalemate; that there is no realistic prospect for a negotiated settlement; and that the longer the fighting continues the worse it will be for the people of Sudan and for the US, the least bad plausible outcome for American interests would be for the SAF to prevail.

Why the Sudanese Armed Forces Are Preferable to the Rapid Support Forces

The RSF and the SAF, and their respective leaders, are both unpalatable, but the latter is less so than the former. While Burhan has links to Russia,¹⁰ they are not as strong as Hemeti's. The latter traveled to Moscow at the beginning of the Ukraine invasion, sent fighters to Libya to campaign alongside Wagner mercenaries on behalf of Khalifa Haftar, and cooperates with Wagner to exploit gold mines in Sudan (though Burhan also appears to be involved in the trade in some form).¹¹

Burhan is also part of a structure that makes him stabler and slightly less erratic than Hemeti, a warlord leading a rapacious militia that formed as part of Khartoum's genocidal campaign in Darfur. While the SAF commits many crimes, reports from the conflict suggest that RSF fighters are primarily the ones looting property and abusing civilians.¹² Currently, RSF-linked militias are also rampaging through parts of Darfur.¹³ Furthermore, SAF elements have previously resisted RSF brutality against civilians.¹⁴

Burhan's succor of Islamists from the Bashir regime is deeply problematic. He allowed some back into government and the army, whereas Hemeti has been more anti-Islamist. Yet the SAF leader may have rehabilitated Islamists to counter Hemeti and the civilians during the transitional period's constant power struggles, as there is no indication that Burhan is himself an

Islamist.¹⁵ He also recently appointed as his vice president a secularist, Malik Agar. That pragmatism suggests that he would disempower the Islamists if his fortunes relied on countries that demanded it—such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the US.

Finally, Hemeti is not a principled anti-Islamist, but an opportunist. He rose to power serving the wishes of Sudan's brutal Islamist regime, so he has a flexible disposition on the Islamist question. If they became useful to him, he would use them.

Egypt's Role

Egypt is probably the foreign power most invested in the conflict's outcome. Cairo ruled its southern neighbor with the British for more than 50 years and has remained enmeshed in its affairs even after Sudanese independence in 1956. Egypt's military is close to its Sudanese counterpart, and General Burhan received military training in Egypt. Cairo fears militias like the RSF because of the havoc they created in its western neighbor, Libya, and more than 40,000 Sudanese refugees have already fled to Egypt.¹⁶ Finally, Cairo wants Khartoum's support for its position on Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam, an issue it views as existential. Egypt is so invested in an army victory that its pilots have flown sorties against the RSF during the conflict.

Given these dynamics, Egypt is the country most likely to strongly intervene on the army's behalf. Washington could signal to Cairo that it would not oppose more aggressive support for the SAF and try to convince other involved states of the necessity of this course of action. It could also share intelligence with Egypt on any RSF-bound weapons shipments—which would most likely go through the Central African Republic and Libya—and on RSF troop movements.

Foreign Powers' Reactions

Many other countries have deep interests in Sudan, and their reactions to further Egyptian involvement on the army's

behalf could alter the trajectory of the conflict. However, those states likely do not have the motivation or means to stymie an Egyptian intervention with indirect American backing.

Central African Republic (CAR). The CAR is so dysfunctional that it is unable to meaningfully involve itself, even if it wished to. Its significance lies in the fact that Wagner has a strong presence there, which would allow it to send weapons or mercenaries to Sudan.

Chad. N'Djamena is likely pro-Burhan as Hemeti's forces contain Chadian Arab fighters and ex-Chadian rebels who could threaten the Chadian government.¹⁷ N'Djamena may fear that if Hemeti takes power, he would support further challenges to its rule.

China. When strife erupts in African countries, Beijing often prioritizes a return to stability as quickly as possible to protect its commercial interests. Sudan's importance to China waned after South Sudan seceded along with much of the country's oil, and as China has imported less African oil in general. Beijing has also already evacuated its nationals from Sudan. It may want to demonstrate support for Persian Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE with which it is deepening bonds, and it would likely be suspicious of American-led efforts in Sudan. However, none of those factors are likely to provoke a Chinese intervention as Beijing usually prefers to avoid the entanglements and reputational damage that can result from involvement in African conflicts.

Eritrea. Asmara and Khartoum have a contentious history as both supported rebel groups fighting the other's government. Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki has more recently cultivated ties with the restive Beja tribe that dominates parts of eastern Sudan.¹⁸ He is reportedly close to groups in Ethiopia's Amhara state and, according to rumors, trained some of its militias during the recent war in northern Ethiopia. Amhara fighters have clashed with SAF elements over the disputed Sudan-Ethiopia border, but that is unlikely to be a compelling enough

reason for Afewerki to support the RSF. Furthermore, he has close ties with Egypt.¹⁹ Afewerki does wish for Eritrea to be a regional power, which suggests he will be alert for opportunities in Sudan to increase his influence.

Ethiopia. The SAF recently fought against Ethiopian forces over contested borderlands, but the issue is likely not important enough to Addis Ababa—especially given its own armed conflicts, delicate peace processes, and economic problems—to prompt it to strongly intervene. However, Addis would be disturbed by a strong Egyptian military presence in Sudan given Cairo's vehement opposition to Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam.

Israel. In 2020, Israel and Sudan agreed to normalize diplomatic relations, and the formal signing of a peace deal was tentatively scheduled for some time this year.²⁰ Tel Aviv wishes to keep that process on track and to keep Sudan from falling again under Islamist domination or Iranian influence. It has ties with Burhan and Hemeti, though is likely closer to the former. Since both warring sides have elements and supporters opposed to normalization with Israel,²¹ Tel Aviv is likely waiting for clarity on the balance of power before deciding how to proceed.

Libya. Khalifa Haftar, the leader of the Libyan National Army, has worked with RSF mercenaries in his country and has reportedly supplied Hemeti's fighters with weapons.²² However, Haftar would be cautious about risking his relationship with Egypt, which supports him in Libya, to strongly support the RSF.

Russia. Of all the involved countries, Russia would perhaps oppose a strong Egyptian intervention against Hemeti the most. Moscow has tried for years to gain a base in Port Sudan, which would give it a commanding position on the Red Sea. A Russian-controlled operation in Sudan's gold fields is so lucrative that it may be helping Moscow weather international sanctions.²³

Russia has hedged its bets over the years by establishing ties with both generals, though it is undoubtedly more involved with Hemeti. Moscow has so far bided its time as it is likely waiting for the military situation to become clearer before deciding how to protect its flow of gold and continue its quest for a Red Sea base. However, even indirect American support for the army might provoke a significant Russian response, as Moscow would conclude that the US would pressure Burhan to thwart its activities in the country.

Even so, it is uncertain how many resources Russia could commit to Sudan as it is locked in an all-consuming war in Ukraine. The Kremlin might use hired guns, but they have their limits as well. Wagner, the most infamous Russian mercenary organization, rarely confronts national militaries. When it has in Ukraine, it has been mauled and forced to rely on prisoner conscripts,²⁴ though the Ukrainian military is more capable than either the SAF or Egyptian military. Most significantly, the mercenary group could supply disruptive weapons like advanced air defense systems and anti-tank guided missiles. However, it is uncertain whether it could do so in sufficient quantities to tip the balance of power. There are also tensions between Wagner and Russia's Defense Ministry,²⁵ which might make it more difficult for Moscow to coordinate with and direct Wagner, though it is highly unlikely that the group would defy a direct command from Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has significant investments in Sudan,²⁶ but none are large enough to prompt a determined intervention. Its other traditional concerns in Sudan—rolling back Iranian and Islamist influence—are not currently gripping because the conflict so far has not opened a pathway for either of those influences to take significant power. Riyadh's recent foreign policy posture also suggests it is trying to escape foreign entanglements²⁷ and to rehabilitate its image sullied by the Yemen war. It is, however, worried about Red Sea stability and is close to Burhan,²⁸ so it might join an effort

to support the SAF if the situation was favorable. Riyadh has hosted representatives of each side for talks, but with no progress so far.

South Sudan. Because of its border with Sudan, one of Juba's primary concerns is to avoid massive refugee flows into its territory. South Sudan also exports oil—its primary source of government revenue—through Sudan. While exports are so far unaffected,²⁹ Juba doubtless wishes for the conflict to end as quickly as possible to avoid disruptions.

The UAE. Abu Dhabi has significant ties to Hemeti. RSF mercenaries fought alongside the Emiratis in Yemen against the Houthis, and fought for Libya's Khalifa Haftar, who was backed by the Egyptians, Emiratis, and Saudis. Dubai is also a hub for illicit Sudanese gold,³⁰ which likely enriches some Emiratis, including powerful ones.

However, the UAE hedged its bets by engaging with Burhan,³¹ whose SAF also provided fighters to the anti-Houthi campaign in Yemen. That war is now not as urgent to the UAE—it even closed its base in Assab, Eritrea, which was used for Yemen operations—making Sudanese fighters less important to Abu Dhabi.

All of this suggests the UAE is not invested enough in Hemeti to strongly oppose increased support to the SAF, and it may believe it can do business with Burhan in the future. However, as already discussed, it is unlikely that Abu Dhabi will strongly enforce sanctions against Hemeti's resources, which are largely held in Dubai,³² or against the black-market gold trade.

The Risks

Any path the US chooses in Sudan will be risky, and indirectly assisting the SAF will be no different. In addition to the dangers already discussed, Egypt has strong ties with Russia, and it might hold back for fear of angering Moscow. The intensity of its interests in Sudan would likely outweigh such fear, however.

Direct Egyptian and indirect American support, in combination with potential assistance from other countries, would likely be enough to help the army degrade the RSF and expel it from most of the population centers. However, the army probably still would not be able to decisively defeat the RSF everywhere in the country. Hemeti could withdraw to his home region of Darfur to fight a long insurgency, though the depleted state of his forces might tempt challenges from the various armed groups in the area. The SAF would also likely have to face other armed groups in different regions fighting for autonomy or self-determination.

Nonetheless, the risks of energized rebellions throughout the country already exist and heighten by the day. Having stability in some of Sudan is preferable to instability everywhere, and Washington should prefer to have significant influence with the government in charge of those stable areas, rather than having little influence in a country engulfed in chaos.

There's a reputational risk to the US of even indirectly supporting an organization with as unsavory a history as the SAF, but that cost may have to be endured to gain the greater potential benefits. Similarly, the Egyptian regime has a bad record on human rights and democracy, but, despite that, Washington has cooperated with Cairo for decades. Working with Egypt in Sudan would continue a well-established American practice.

Finally, managing such a delicate task would be arduous and would require an attentiveness and pragmatism that is often difficult for the US government to muster or maintain. Washington would have to closely monitor Burhan's behavior to ensure he is upholding the commitments the US should demand, and be willing to hold him accountable if he does not. Unforeseen events will also inevitably occur and would risk entangling the US in an increasingly difficult situation. Washington would have to stay focused on its core goals, and continuously assess the strategy's effectiveness.

Possible Benefits

Washington should be under no illusions about Burhan even if it decides to indirectly support him. He is anti-democratic, brutal, and power-hungry. Yet his position is currently precarious enough that he should be willing to make significant concessions for the opportunity to survive an existential contest and degrade his chief armed rival. And even if he prevails against the RSF, he would face a shattered economy and almost certainly continued violence in parts of the country, which would motivate him to maintain the favor of any American-involved coalition that was supporting him.

In this scenario, Washington should demand that Burhan disempower the Islamists from the government and security services; guarantee that Moscow will not get a base in Sudan; push the Russians out of the gold trade; and strike a deal that gives civilians significant influence within the government.

Such an arrangement would require that the US work with Sudanese civilians to foster as much unity and agreement as possible, something that would be extremely difficult. Distrust of the US is widespread within the civilian resistance, and many would understandably view a compromise as a betrayal of the discipline, commitment, and courage the protest movement has maintained for years.

Yet while the civilians were for the past four years the only hope of forcing the security services to genuinely share power, the fighting has depleted the effectiveness of their mass mobilization and disruption techniques. Until a baseline of stability returns to Sudan, the civilian movement has little power. A compromise now appears to be the best route available for gaining representation in the government that would allow them to continue the struggle for a truly civilian-led and democratic system.

Finally, the Sudan crisis could drive a wedge between Russia and Egypt if they take up opposite causes.

Competent American leadership that rallies countries like Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to a common cause in Sudan could also draw them closer to each other and to Washington.

The Least-Bad-Option Policy

Some of the many pitfalls associated with indirectly assisting the Sudanese army can be mitigated by decisive American action. If other powers observe that the US has clear goals and a plausible strategy coupled with the necessary commitment to achieve them, it will discourage some of the adventurism that other countries are probably contemplating.

It may also elicit support from states that have cultivated both sides in Sudan. Countries hedge in a situation like Sudan's to ensure influence with whichever side wins. If the hedgers believe that the SAF will prevail, they will more fully support it to avoid being caught backing the losing side.

The situation in Sudan has left Washington with a series of bad options from which to choose. If it acts decisively and wisely, it can defend against some of the worst outcomes and possibly salvage some benefits. If Washington stumbles, however, other actors will assert themselves, with the likely outcome that it will be even harder for the US to achieve its goals in one of Africa's most important countries.

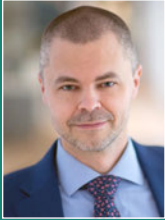
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