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The Silent Genocide in Sudan: Warring Generals and Transcontinental Interests

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By

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Introduction

The African continent with its rich heritage, vivid topography, virtually pristine regions and inspiring anticolonial movements, unfortunately remains the epicenter of coup d'états, genocides driven by incessant civil wars, entrenched corruption and global rush for copious natural resources. As the salt of the earth across the world protest for the Palestinian struggle, Republic of Sudan is also witnessing a genocide which has mutilated the sanctity of human life and adduced to the failure of the so called international community to adequately respond to humanitarian crisis. As these ongoing tragedies are being recorded in real-time, the unadulterated footage and stories of survivors is nothing short of unutterable. The case of Sudan tends to dip out of the headlines, but that doesn't mean that the flagrant human rights violations cease rather the situation of especially the most vulnerable segments of the social fabric persistently aggravate. The objective of this issue brief is to acquaint the readers with gravity of what has been and persists to brew in Northeastern African nation and elicit a much more concerted and effective intervention by the international community.

Sudan is no stranger to genocide and coup d'états

Sudan is an integral part of the horn of Africa; etymologically its name is from the Arabic phrase "bilada-as-Sudan" or "land of the blacks."¹ Sudan was hitherto known as Nubia before settlement of Arab nomads who functioned as a conduit for the onset of Islamization from 14th to 15th centuries. Later, it became part of the British Empire following occupation by Egypt in the 19th Century, thereby it was nominally called as the condominium of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.² The year 1956 marked the independence of Sudan from the fetters of colonialism, albeit what was to come in the following decades only solidified the reign of terror and kleptocracy with the Sudanese military

¹ "Sudan: The World Fact book," CIA, last modified March 5, 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/sudan/>

² Sudan: The World Fact book."

establishment having a dominant role in state affairs. The first coup was imposed 2 years after independence by a retired military official and Premier Abdallah Kahlil, dissolved his own civilian dispensation in order to put the North Eastern African country under the martial rule of Ibrahim Abboud.³ Almost a decade later (1969) history was repeated with another coup choreographed by Colonel Gaafar Nimeiry, who successfully removed Ismail Al-Azhari. However, in 1985, Nimeiry was ousted by another military man, Abdel Al-Dahab whose intervention created a democratic setup.⁴

The most notable period and perhaps the source of current instability, was of ruthless military regime of President Omar Ahmad al-Bashir which lasted for over three decades (1989 – 2018) as he ousted Premier Sadiq al-Mahdi.⁵ Protracted rule of Sudanese military oligarchy with only bouts of quasi-democracy is ipso facto amongst the reasons why the peace and equitable development has eluded the country. The Darfur Genocide of 2003 featured an armed rebellion of ethnic sub-Saharan Sudanese tribes. The backdrop of the aforementioned genocide was that the region was plumbing the depths of acute poverty, neglect by the government and meagre political representation in Khartoum. An infamous militia was created by al-Bashir known as the Popular Defense Forces or the “Janjaweed” spearheaded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, colloquially referred to as “Hemedti” inspired by the Arabic word “Himayati” (Protector).⁶ This militant outfit was not only responsible for the killing non-Arab Darfuri tribes en masse but also provided cover to the brass of the Sudanese military officials. For the genocide and forced displacement of aforementioned tribes – around 300,000 were killed and 2.7 million displaced - al-Bashir was convicted.⁷ Subsequently, Janjaweed as an antecedent was majorly rechristened with the nomenclature of the current Rapid Support Forces (RSF), swelling ranks and accumulating wealth in the years to come. It has attracted foot soldiers and mercenaries beyond Sudan’s borders, such as nomadic tribesmen from Chad and Niger, has active footprint in the cockpits of Libya, Central African Republic and Yemen.⁸ Unlike his dictatorial predecessors, al-Bashir engineered “coup-proofing” that encompassed several groups that would not only safeguard him, but keep an eye on one another.⁹ Just like the paramilitary RSF, al-Bashir dispatched SAF along with pro-government militias to clamp down on dissent in Christian majority, oil rich South Sudan,

³ “Sudan’s conflict explained,” *VOX*, May 26, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDfhxMwoyWo>

⁴ “Sudan’s conflict explained.”

⁵ Sudan’s conflict explained.”

⁶ Sudan’s conflict explained.”

What’s happening in Sudan?,” *Al Jazeera English*, April 19, 2023,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TnSybPgiQs&t=107s>

⁷ “Nearly eight million people displaced by war in Sudan: UN,” *Al Jazeera*, January 31, 2024,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/31/nearly-eight-million-people-displaced-by-war-in-sudan-un>

“What’s happening in Sudan?”

⁸ Alex de Waal, “Sudan is collapsing – here’s how to stop it,” Chatham House, February 2, 2024,

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2024-02/sudan-collapsing-heres-how-stop-it#:~:text=According%20to%20United%20Nations%20figures,crisis%20and%20risk%20of%20famine.>

⁹ Sudan’s conflict explained.”

and the war crimes that transpired especially gender based warranted international community's intervention – South Sudan seceded into an independent state in 2011.¹⁰

So in other words SAF and RSF essentially formed a potent layer of protection around al-Bashir's reign, providing lucrative opportunities to both groups. On one hand, Hemedti was allowed to profiteer from some of the gold mines in Darfur, smuggle arms and minerals in the region's neighborhood not least to Libya and Chad, and offer foot soldiers to war-torn countries like Libya and Yemen in exchange was colossal amount of money.¹¹ Simultaneously, SAF's loyalty was also kept intact by letting the corrupt brass make fortunes from the telecommunication and arms industries.¹² All the while, the tremors from the tanking of Sudanese economy was borne by the civilians – oil revenues from South Sudan were no longer available to fill the coffers. To add insult to injury, al-Bashir earmarked 60% to 70% for the security sector in the country's budget, which meant more wealth for General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and General Hemedti.¹³ On the contrary, a paltry 5% outlay was designated for the education, social services and education, a textbook security state. This signified the last straw, Sudanese denizens took to the streets; these pro-democracy demonstrations and sit-ins weren't confined to Khartoum, but spread like wild fire. As anticipated, President Al-Bashir deployed two of the most potent arsenals of his coup-proofing, SAF and RSF to heinously clamp down on demonstrators. Notwithstanding how the state turned on the demonstrations, the situation catapulted beyond the point of return not least for al-Bashir.

The 2019 civic revolution and preordained failure of Hamdok's civilian setup.

However, on 19 April, 2019, on the heels of countrywide anti-al Bashir demonstrations, non-violent revolution imbued the country, this wave of protests was weaponized as an opportunity for a coup d'états by two erstwhile aide-de-camps of Bashir, General al-Burhan and General Hemedti Al-Bashir was ousted from the Presidency.¹⁴ Consequently, albeit al-Bashir's removal was a moment of democratic jubilation, the protests against the de facto rule of the Burhan-Hemedti polycephaly raged on. Resultantly, the Transitional Sovereign Council created by virtue of international pressures from the UK, African Union, GCC (particularly Saudi Arabia and UAE) and the US – initially it received U\$ 3 billion from both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.¹⁵ The objective

¹⁰ "What's happening in Sudan?"

Sudan's conflict explained."

¹¹ Sudan's conflict explained."

"Sudan is collapsing."

¹² Sudan's conflict explained."

¹³ Ruth Maclean, "Dozens have been killed by the regime. But Sudan's protestors march on," *The Guardian*, December 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/30/dozens-have-died-but-sudan-protesters-march-on>

¹⁴ "What's happening in Sudan?"

"Sudan's conflict explained."

¹⁵ "What's happening in Sudan?"

"Sudan's conflict explained."

was to execute a power sharing formula between the military and civilians, to rule for 18 and 21 months respectively, in a bid to segue Sudan towards a bona fide democracy.¹⁶ However, the two men complicit in egregious war crimes in Darfur and South Sudan, were made Chair (al-Burhan) and Vice Chair (Hemedti) of the Transitional Council, which meant decisive vires and oversight was reserved with the security establishment, inviting the justified reservations from the civilian protestors.¹⁷ The aforementioned council's appointed Premier Abdalla Hamdok, who haplessly wasn't able to resuscitate the economy or contain security establishment's intervention, thereby was preordained to fail.¹⁸ Fast-forward to 2021, Hamdok resigned due to intensification of protests, political impasse and security establishment's stranglehold, resultantly al-Burhan's forces took over the reins of governance.¹⁹ This brought to the fore the sanguinary tug of war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in military green fatigues and the paramilitary RSF in khaki fatigues, to determine the "top dog".²⁰ The undertone of the tension and concomitant outburst between internecine SAF and 100,000 strong second army led by Hemedti is the plans for the formal integration of the RSF into the SAF; General al-Burhan, the de facto leader of Sudan, wants the aforementioned process to be executed in 2 years, while General Hemedti, who has been enjoying much independence and impunity, is diametrically opposed to the idea as he wants the timeline to be extended to a decade.²¹ In other words, Hemedti refuses to play second fiddle, therefore with each passing day, the civil war in Sudan which is being live-streamed is exacerbating. The Hemedti-Burhan rivalry continues to push Sudan into unspeakable chaos

Sudanese caught in the crossfire between two megalomaniac Generals

The capital Khartoum is witnessing an all-out war and a dangerous infighting in the streets, between the two sides jockeying to seize control of the airport, presidential palace and the national television station. SAF possesses airpower, while RSF are embedded all across the capital including residential neighborhoods, equipped with anti-aircraft guns, which means the denizens of Sudan find themselves in the crossroads of this conflict.²² According to UN estimates, over 13,900 Sudanese have been killed, while around 8.1 million (6.14 million internally displaced) have been displaced; 100,000 have crossed into Ethiopia, 50,000 fled to neighboring Chad, whereas approximately 1500

Talal Mohammed, "How Sudan Became a Saudi-UAE Proxy war," *Foreign Policy*, July 12, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/12/sudan-conflict-saudi-arabia-uae-gulf-burhan-hemeti-rsf/#:~:text=Gulf%20heavyweights%20Saudi%20Arabia%20and,the%20Sudanese%20military%20are%20slim>.

¹⁶ "Sudan's conflict explained."

¹⁷ "What's happening in Sudan?"

"Sudan's conflict explained."

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ "What's happening in Sudan?"

²¹ "What's happening in Sudan?"

"Sudan's conflict explained."

²² "What's happening in Sudan?"

"Sudan's conflict explained."

have sought refuge in the newly founded South Sudan.²³ The fighting continues as this brief is written, harrowing stories of mass rape and pillage are surfacing, as RSF extends its control to regions like Wad Madani, east of Khartoum. While, SAF has been indiscriminately targeting residential compounds in urban centers due to RSF prevalence on the ground. A dystopian aspect of such conflicts is the surge in gender-based violence; women especially from non-Arab tribes are being deliberately being impregnated by Arab militias in particular the RSF, while the victims are reported to have little to no access to birth control pills. On the other hand, the collapse of the country is testified by how out of a total of 46.8 million (population of Sudan), 24.8 million are in dire need of assistance from the international community.²⁴

Beyond the civil war: Sudan a vortex of proxy warfare

Historians deem the Horn of Africa as the cradle of humanity; Sudan has functioned as a gateway into Africa across the Red Sea and a stepping stone for the merchants, proselytizers, and travelers or explorers from the Arabian Peninsula. In terms of the lens of transcontinental rivalries and vested interests have augmented the breadth of quandary vis-à-vis the Sudanese conflict. It won't be unfounded to state how 6 member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE are geo-strategically knit to Sudan, inter alia, supply chain hegemony, copious gold reserves, transcontinental terrorism. Contrasting policies and strategies of the two aforementioned Gulf powerhouses are not an anomaly, recently in the Yemeni war theatre the initial objectives of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh were virtually aligned, however in the aftermath in the fight against the Houthis, the former put its weight behind the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) led by President Major General Aidarus al-Zoubaidi, whereas Riyadh continues to back the globally recognized President Rashad al-Alimi (and his predecessor Abdrabbuh Mansur) who also heads the 8 member Presidential Council, in other words the Saudis want Yemen to remain a nation-state free of secessionist perils.²⁵ Aforementioned Emirati support for STC paid dividends in terms of access to Yemeni islands, ports, and particularly Horn of Africa as well as Bab el-Mandeb Strait.²⁶ In the context of Sudanese war theatre, the RSF enjoys the support of the Emirati President, Sheikh Mohamed Zayed (MBZ), not least for its participation in the sporadic Yemen war against the Shiite militant group, Houthis.²⁷ Whereas, on the other hand, al-Burhan is viewed as close partner of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman al Saud aka MBS, in a nutshell the Sudanese conflict manifests all ingredients of a proxy cockpit.²⁸ The case of Sudan perfectly dovetails into the Saudi-Emirati template of rush for investment opportunities, inter alia infrastructure especially ports, mining, agriculture. To materialize the ambitions of the two monarchies, indigenous partnerships with various

²³ "Nearly eight million people displaced."

"Sudan Situation Report," OCHA, February 23, 2024, <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/>

²⁴ Sudan Situation Report."

²⁵ "How Sudan Became a Saudi-UAE Proxy war."

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

tribes predating the current conflict and warring factions have been crafted as an instrument monopoly and leverage.

For the Emiratis, Hemedti has been the go-to guy, as his mercenaries and foot soldiers were used in the Yemen war. RSF is the protector UAE's investment and interests in collaboration with Russia paramilitary outfit, Wagner group – Wagner group has been active in Sudan since 2017.²⁹ These two well-equipped militant entities not only function as custodians of Sudanese gold mines, but also jointly transport the reserves to UAE and Russia – Kremlin's dependence on gold has grown by manifolds since the invasion of Ukraine triggering sanctions on Putin's Russia.³⁰ A consummate confluence of vested interests forged a partnership amidst uncertain times and precarious supply chains. Additionally, at the behest of Emirati Kingdom in 2019 both, RSF and Wagner group buttressed the military campaign of renegade Libyan General, Khalifa Haftar embedded in South Eastern part of the country.³¹ In the diplomatic sphere, Khartoum became a signatory of the Abraham Accords through the efforts of Abu Dhabi, concretizing itself as a potent ally and stabilizing force for the US, at par with Riyadh.³² Since 2018, a periodical investments worth U\$ 13.6 Billion have been offered by UAE which strategically entails the U\$ 4 billion Red Sea port (Around U\$ 7.6 Billion has already been invested).³³ The port project is a modicum of a larger Emirati ambition of greater military presence and clout in the Red sea, Indian Ocean Yemen and the Horn of Africa. Moreover, the Gulf heavyweight has also indicated to immediately deposit U\$ 300 million worth of emergency funds in Sudan's Central Bank.³⁴

Conversely, although the Saudis want to be depicted as a neutral actor or a mediator in this conflict that all actors could deem acceptable, the Kingdom even hosted negotiations between al-Burhan and Hemedti last year in Jeddah which were to no avail.³⁵ The Emirati-Saudi relation isn't one of adversaries, for a good part of history, partnerships have trumped over competition. However, MBS has articulated for a more assertive and volte-face leading role in the volatile region in contrast to the conservative public profiles of erstwhile Saudi monarchs. Rapprochement with Ebrahim Raisi-led Iran and mediating in places like Syria, Lebanon and Palestine generally allude to Saudis' role as a stability multiplier. Vis-à-vis investments, Saudis have announce to turn on the spigot of funds worth a mammoth U\$ 24 billion, following the fall of al-Bashir in 2022.³⁶ That being said, MBS's subtle proclivity is towards General Burhan as the head of the Sudanese armed forces, thus having relatively greater legitimacy to stabilize the war-weary nation; Khartoum has in the past sent SAF troops to Yemen on Riyadh's behest.³⁷ In addition

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

³⁴ "How Sudan Became a Saudi-UAE Proxy war."

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

there's another regional player which was once a juggernaut of Pan-Arabism and has lost its diplomatic clout it used to possess, Egypt led by President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. Cairo has historically been in close contact with SAF, therefore if the security threshold is crossed, a risky military intervention despite Egypt's economic woes, could be on the cards.³⁸ RSF controlled Sudan will be staunchly challenged by Egypt, redoubling existing tensions between Abu Dhabi and Cairo emanating from the Ethiopian conflict. Such a high risk move by Sisi would swing the pendulum in Riyadh's favor, but in the long run the Kingdom's position as a unifier of the GCC, or the broader Arab World could erode.

Conclusion

Plumes of smoke undulating and long queues of displaced people have become a common sight in Sudan; the world seems to have forgotten about this desecration of human sanctity; it is a silent genocide per se. Sudan appears to move in the same circle designed by the military junta. Additionally, it can be argued that its geostrategic location functions as a *mise-en-scène* for global/regional Machiavellian maneuvers. However, as with the case of instability, it could eventually trigger a phantasmagoria of events that can fragment and dysfunction the state apparatus beyond salvation. The power struggle in Sudan is of two uncompromising and myopic Generals, who are willing to raze the country to the ground, while committing horrendous crimes against humanity that one would tremble to narrate the dying ember of democracy needs to be rekindled and democratic preferences of the denizens must be deemed sacrosanct rather than pliable. The international players must redouble efforts to rescue the Sudanese from this Orwellian reality, otherwise this silent genocide will leave an immutable blot on humanity.

³⁸ Ibid