

Soldiers of Fortune: The Evolving Role of Sudanese Militias in Libya

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Summary

Since the ouster of the Libyan strong man Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011, outside interventions have compounded the Libyan civil conflict and presented a risk to regional security. Foreign militias and mercenaries, especially from neighbouring Sudan and Chad, operating in Libya have proliferated. A report presented to the UN Security Council last October noted that Sudanese armed groups are flocking to Libya in support of the warring Libyan parties. Furthermore, reports mention that the Sudanese paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) were deployed in Libya to fight alongside military strongman Khalifa Haftar. The involvement of the Sudanese militiamen (both rebels and the RSF) in the Libyan civil war does not only pose a direct threat to the security and stability of an already war-ravaged country, but also complicate efforts to end the conflict. These fighters are engaged in smuggling and hu-

man trafficking across the region between Sudan and Libya. Their presence on both sides of the border further contributes into larger criminal networks, such as groups affiliated with the Haftar's Libyan National Army, which is also accused of killing migrants, human trafficking and smuggling into Europe.

This discussion paper explores the mercenary nature of the Sudanese paramilitary groups' in Libya. It also looks into how the RSF's involvement (i.e. the RSF commander General Mohamed Hemedti) in the current transitional government in Sudan might hamper the ability of the Sudanese leadership to formalise a coherent policy towards the Libyan conflict. Finally, it briefly addresses how the divisive use of trans-border mercenaries could contribute to the further instability in Africa, such as fragmentation of the security sector and erosion of the state's authority.



Sudanese demonstrators carry placards and chant slogans as they protest outside the Foreign Ministry in the capital Khartoum on January 28, 2020. - Dozens of Sudanese protested in Khartoum, alleging that their relatives had been recruited by a UAE firm as security guards but were despatched to war-zones in Libya and Yemen. (Mahmoud Hajaj - Anadolu Agency)

Introduction

Libya has been in a civil turmoil since 2011 when a popular revolution supported by a NATO intervention toppled long-time ruler Muammar al-Qaddafi, ending his over four-decade long reign. In 2014, Libya witnessed a political deadlock, which divided the North African country into two competing administrations, each with its own parliament and government: The Tripoli-based government in the west and the Tobruk-based Interim Government led by Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thinni in the east. At the end of 2015, Libyan factions under UN mediation established a Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli headed by Fayez al-Serraj as Chairman of the Presidential Council and Prime Minister (UNSMIL, 2015). The international community recognised the new Tripoli-based GNA. However, implementation of the political agreement has been frustrated by allegations of illegitimacy by rival factions, most notably by the Thinni rival that continued to work in the east, supported General Khalifa Haftar, the leader of the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA). In addition to the GNA and LNA, militias control significant swaths of the country, engaging in activities ranging from human trafficking to competition over state resources.

In April 2019, Khalifa Haftar's LNA forces launched an offensive to take over Tripoli, sparking clashes with the forces of the internationally-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA). Since then the conflict in and around the capital city Tripoli has killed more than 2,000 people and displaced over 200,000 from their homes. The rival camps have been backed by a range of foreign powers that further complicate the Libyan civil war with the potential to upgrade it into a full regional proxy conflict. For example, While Turkey has extended a diplomatic and security support to UN recognised GNA, others, including the UAE, Egypt and Russia, have lent a hand to regenerate Haftar's assault on Tripoli. In the past few years reports have documented an influx of foreign fighters into Libya, allegedly contracted by the Libyan factions and their respective foreign supporters. One of the foreign interferences in Libya that took a more direct shape is the increase of armed groups from neighbouring Sudan. Since 2017, reports have confirmed the presence of Sudanese mercenaries in Libya, thus fuelling the conflict and posing a direct threat to the security and stability of Libya. These Sudanese mercenaries have been involved in looting properties owned by Libyan oil firms, which were then smuggled to Sudan and sold in the black market.¹

In December 2019, a report by the United Nations Experts on Libya accused Sudan of violating the UN arms embargo on Libya. The report documented that the commander of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti, deployed 1,000 of his troops to Libya in support of Haftar (UN Security Council, 2019a). In December of that year, a report by the Guardian documented that as many as 3,000 armed Sudanese mercenaries, including fighters from the war-torn Darfur region, have joined the ranks of Haftar's LNA against the internationally recognised government in Tripoli (Burke & Salih, 2019). In January 2020, Sudanese families protested in front of the United Arab Emirates embassy in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum following news that an Emirati company had allegedly recruited hundreds of young Sudanese men as security guards for private companies in the UAE and subsequently sent them to fight in proxy wars in Yemen and Libya. Once they arrived in the UAE, the young men were reportedly given military training and ordered to either fight in Libya or Yemen (Middle East Monitor, 2020).

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Meet the Mercenaries: The Evolution of the Rapid Support Forces

The most well-known Sudanese mercenary activities are carried out by the Rapid Support Forces, which are an integral part of the Sudanese security forces. The RSF is a transnational mercenary paramilitary force that seized power in Sudan following the deposal of the long-time leader Omar al-Bashir in April 2019. More than 15 years ago, the world became familiar with a group of government-aligned militiamen, known as the Janjaweed, at the height of the disastrous Darfur conflict. The core of the Janjaweed militia is formed from the camel-herding nomads from the Mahariya and Mahamid offshoots of the Rizeigat Arab ethnic group of northern Darfur and neighbouring areas of Chad. Earning global infamy as 'devils on horseback', the predominantly Arab Janjaweed acted as the main rivals of the non-Arab Darfurian rebel groupsⁱⁱ and have been accused of significant human rights violations during the war. The allegations include that the pro-government militia had systematically targeted

Darfuriansⁱⁱⁱ by attacking civilians, burning villages, raping women, looting economic resources and gradually destroying traditional cultural relics owned by the targeted peripheral communities. As a result, the height of the violence that raged in the period from 2003 to 2005 left more than 200,000 people dead and over 2 million others displaced according to the UN and human rights agencies (CNN, 2008). Khartoum denied that it used the militia in its counter-insurgency war against the rebels. However, the International Criminal Court (ICC) tracked the alliance between the militia and the Sudanese government to the highest level of Sudanese authorities. In 2009, the Hague-based court indicted five individuals,^{iv} including then-President al-Bashir, for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide allegedly committed in Darfur between 2003 and 2008. Currently, none of the suspects are in ICC custody.



Sudanese General and Vice President of the Sudanese Transitional Military Council, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (C) attends a signing ceremony in Khartoum on July 17, 2019. (Mahmoud Hjjaj - Anadolu Agency)

In 2006, the Janjaweed militia was absorbed into the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Border Guards. Khartoum appointed Musa Hilal, the commander of the militia, as the head of the Border Guards. The militia was again mobilized and deployed during operations in neighbouring Chad between 2007 and 2008 to re-enforce the Chadian rebels backed by the Sudanese government carrying out attacks on government positions across the border. In 2012, gold was found in Darfur in areas controlled by Hilal, pitting him against the central government over the control of gold mines and the spoils of the newfound treasure. Over the subsequent years, Khartoum armed Hilal's rival, General Mohamed Hamdan Dagolo, formalising his paramilitary force as the Rapid Support Force (RSF) with a presidential decree in 2013. General Mohamed is widely nicknamed as "Hemedti" (Little Mohamed) because of his baby-faced appearances. In 2017, Hemedti's forces defeated Hilal's Border Guards, arresting Hilal and his senior aides. Furthermore, the Sudanese government deployed the RSF to control the border to prevent smuggling and illicit migration. This allowed the militia to amass large sums of money from smuggling goods and products to and from Libya and Chad and trafficking people across the Sahara. In addition, President al-Bashir tasked the formerly Janjaweed paramilitaries with disarmament campaigns in Darfur, which served as an opportunity of acquiring weapons and military equipment and seizing key checkpoints and smuggling routes. For that reason, within a short period Gen. Hemedti became Sudan's number one gold trader, border guard and smuggler. This also led the paramilitary group to become the de-facto military rulers of the conflict-ridden northern region of Darfur (Etefa, 2019). Over the years the Sudanese government has defended the use of the paramilitary group, claiming it "has the same mobility as the rebel groups and can defeat them by using the same military tactics," (Sudan Tribune, 2017). In 2015, Human Rights Watch accused the RSF of committing war crimes during two counterinsurgency campaigns in the long-embattled region of Darfur between 2014 and 2015 (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

In the following years, the RSF evolved to become the favoured anti-coup tool of the former president and Sudan's long-time ruler Omar al-Bashir who called Gen. Hemedti, 'Himayti', meaning my protector. In 2013, the leadership of the Sudanese military refused plans to be responsible for the notorious militia, complaining about the RSF's lack of discipline and adventurism. The group was instead put under the direct control of

the president. Following this decision, training centres for the group were established in Khartoum and its outskirts, providing the RSF with a greater presence in the capital. Subsequently, the ragtag RSF has become the most powerful security actor in Sudan, thanks to its effectiveness, having its infantry units in the capital as well as the its political budget controlled by its leader Hemedti.

During the 2018-19 Sudanese uprising, which toppled the regime of al-Bashir, the former Janjaweed head reportedly turned against his former boss as the protests against al-Bashir's three-decade authoritarian rule gained momentum. Eventually, the military sided with the protesters and removed al-Bashir from power in April 2019. Hemedti subsequently became Vice-President of Sudan's ruling Transitional Military Council also known as the Sovereignty Council. However, Hemedti's paramilitary force has been accused of widespread abuses in the country during the protests. The horrific killing of 120 peaceful protestors, many of whom were dumped in the Nile River, in Khartoum in June 2019 is believed to have been orchestrated by the RSF (Amnesty International, 2019).

Currently, The RSF is the dominant actor in Sudan's security domain and Hemedti is considered as Sudan's most powerful figure politically and commercially. The militiaman continues to be at the epicentre of a web of patronage, secret security deals, and political payoffs. Therefore, it is no surprise that he occupies al-Bashir's place in terms of influence in post-Bashir Sudan. The RSF's 'Special Operations Branch,' led by Hemedti's relatives, created the Al-Junaid Company, which encompasses a vast conglomerate engaged in investment, housing, road construction, transportation and mining, among other interests. The powerful general is engaged in a PR program to polish his image and promote himself as a strong leader that can accumulate more regional and global backing. To this end, he struck a deal with a Canadian lobby firm Dickens & Madson in a \$6-million contract designed to engage in a PR campaign meant to get him political access in the United States and Russia (Amin, 2019). It is believed that the military-political entrepreneur is on good terms with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In May 2019, he travelled to Saudi Arabia and met with the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, vowing to support the Kingdom's efforts against Iran (The National, 2019). Following calls from political groups in the Sudanese revolution to withdraw troops from Yemen and curb external intervention (notably

from the Gulf States) in Sudan, Hemedti denounced the criticism directed at the Gulf powers by declaring that, "we need external support so that we can stand on our own feet. But some people fought all those who support us. They did not allow them to work and kept insulting them day and night," (Sudan Tribune, 2020).

Furthermore, the militiaman is engaged in South Sudanese mediation. He participated in the latest deal in which the leaders of South Sudanese warring parties have once again declared an official end to the country's brutal civil war (Guardian World, 2019). Most

recently, Hemedti announced that his country would mediate between Egypt and Ethiopia over the latter's controversial Grand Renaissance Dam on the Nile River (Magdy, 2020). Ethiopia plans to create much-needed electricity for its growing population and economy. Egypt, which depends on the Nile as the main source of freshwater, fears the dam would negatively impact its share of the Nile water. The two African countries have been unable to reach a deal on the Nile waters despite rounds of talks in the past five months mediated by the US government in Washington DC.



(Mahmoud Hajaj - Anadolu Agency)

History of 'Mercenarism'

One of the primary sources of General Hemedti's power is the use of mercenarised paramilitarism, which the Nile Valley has been known for centuries. In the nineteenth century, mercenary armies freely operated across present-day Sudan, South Sudan, and Chad, formally acknowledging oaths of allegiance to the Khedive of Egypt—an autonomous tributary state of the Ottoman Empire—but also establishing their own private empires. These smaller empires engaged in slave trading across this vast area of (Clarence-Smith, 1989). Captives were sent to Khartoum's slave market and then to the Red Sea ports of Suakin and Massawa en route to the Arabian Peninsula, while others travelled to Cairo down the Nile River. As the demand for new labour for the enormously expanded Egyptian cotton cultivation grew especially during the American Civil War (1861-

1865), merchants and their private mercenaries further expanded the slave-raiding grounds into the present-day Central African Republic, therefore expanding the Red Sea slave trade.

During the colonial period, Britain followed a policy of governing Sudan under separate administrations: one for the dominant Arab and Muslim population in the north and another for a non-Arab, mostly Christian and Animist population in the south. Upon gaining independence in 1956, the UK transferred power to northern Sudanese elites and the north-south divide kept the country fundamentally divided, triggering deadly conflicts. During the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005),^v foreign powers became involved in the conflict for their own geopolitical ambitions. For

example, with the north receiving external backing from its Muslim neighbours, such as Libya, the southern Sudanese rebels, commonly referred to as the Anya-Nya, were supported by Ethiopia, Uganda and Israel (Poggo, 2001). Soldiers of fortune activities and cross-border movements of armed groups were widespread during this conflict. In addition to the ethnic and religious diversity between the south and north, it is believed the mercenary involvement in the conflict was fuelled by the discovery of oil in the south (Moro, 2006). According to Sabelo Gumedze, the mercenaries often depict themselves as private security companies and “manoeuvre their way into diverse business activities in the name of helping to achieve peace and security in Africa, this is gainsaid by the blatant involvement of the industry in countries with rich mineral resources such as Sierra Leone, Angola, Liberia and Sudan,” (Gumedze, 2008). The civil war ended in 2005 when the al-Bashir government granted southern Sudan autonomy, a referendum on self-determination in 2011 and an equal distribution of oil revenues from the south.

In early 2008, thousands of rebels from eastern Chad attacked the Chadian capital, N'Djamena, intending to topple President Idriss Déby (Giroux et al., 2009). Khartoum supplied the weapons and vehicles used by the rebels attacking the government in N'Djamena. The rebels had prepared their attack in western Darfur and north-eastern Central African Republic, and many fighters among their ranks were mercenaries, mostly Janjaweed from Darfur. The Chadian government survived thanks to support from France as well as rebel fighters from western Sudan, whose leadership hails from the same tribe as Déby—the Zaghawa- (ibid). During the 2013 conflict in the neighbouring Central African Republic (CAR), Sudanese mercenaries joined the Séléka rebels that subjugated the CAR army, took control of the capital Bangui and removed the president (UN Human Rights Council, 2017). In addition, reports indicate that Sudanese fighters joined the notorious Lord's Resistance Army, which continues to commit crimes in CAR, South Sudan, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (ibid).

South Sudan seceded in 2011, effectively taking away about 70 per cent of the oil wells and leaving the economy of the north, and the government that depends upon it, considerably poorer. The Sudanese government has subsequently sought to pursue new strategies aimed at mitigating the loss of oil revenues. First, Khartoum undertook a campaign of leasing agricultural land to foreigners and increasing tax

revenue. Second, it sought to export the artisanal gold by empowering the RSF paramilitaries that controlled the gold mines. Finally, the Sudanese regime sought to cope with the resulting economic realities by engaging in state mercenarism—the provision of military services to the Gulf Arab States in return of large sums of money. The opportunity was provided by Yemen, which slid into political crisis and civil war after events surrounding the 2011 Arab Spring.

In 2015, Sudanese forces were deployed to Yemen to join the Saudi-led anti-Houthi Arab military coalition. A year later, an estimated contingent of 7,000-15,000 RSF fighters was deployed separately, paid by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Moreover, RSF commanders have reportedly directly collaborated with the Saudi and Emirati recruiters to draw individual militia members from the conflict-ridden Darfur region, reportedly paying them compensation of approximately \$55,000 each for five years' mercenary duty. However, children were allegedly not spared from the recruitment drive. According to a New York Times report in December 2018, the Saudi-UAE recruiters outsourced many children (which make over 20 per cent of the Sudanese fighters) as young as 14 years old from the impoverished Darfur (Kirkpatrick, 2018). The report noted that the recruiters offered the poor Darfuri families at least \$10,000 to send their boys to fight against Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen. Additionally, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi offered irregular budgetary support to the Sudan, for instance, after severing ties and expelled Iranian diplomats from Khartoum in 2016. The corruption trial of the ex-leader al-Bashir recently revealed that he received millions in illicit cash funds from his Gulf patrons (Burke and Salih, 2019).

Following Omar al-Bashir's removal in the first half of 2019, protesters demanded that Sudanese forces be recalled from the war in Yemen. As a result, the new Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdook, announced that his administration reduced the Sudanese fighters and pledged to withdraw his country's troops from the conflict (Uqba, 2019). However, the lucrative war has a consequence back home. Residents of Darfur complained that Darfuri fighters, who returned from Yemen, have exacerbated tensions in the region. Darfuri civilians claim the Yemen war strengthened the RSF, which is accused by rights groups of continuing to commit alleged war crimes in Sudan and fear the armed fighters might initiate a new round of conflict in the region (Trew, 2019a).

On the Frontlines in Libya

Sudanese fighters participate in the Libyan conflict in support of Khalifa Haftar. As Haftar encountered strong resistance from the Tripoli-based government and faced limits to the mobilisation of additional Libyan recruits, he began a campaign of recruiting foreign fighters, many of them from Sudan. In February 2018, the mayor of the southwestern Libyan city of Sabha decried that foreign mercenaries loyal to Haftar have captured his city in a televised speech. He noted that "Sabha areas are occupied by foreign forces from Sudan, Chad and other countries... This is an occupation of Libyan land. This is on the shoulders of all Libyans," (Assad, 2018). Additionally, members of Libyan Parliament accused Sudanese fighters under the command of Haftar of

destroying civilian properties and participating in "ethnic cleansing" against the Tubu community—a non-Arab ethnic minority group in southern Libya (Assad, 2019). Reports indicate that Sudanese, as well as Chadian soldiers of fortune, have aided Haftar's largely unopposed military expansion campaign in southern Libya and have played a significant role in capturing and securing oil fields. The presence of these fighters in Libya became clear in June 2019, when the forces of the UN-backed government seized Gharyan, a strategic town south of the capital, Tripoli, and captured about 120 prisoners, approximately half of them Sudanese and Chadian fighters (Lacher, 2019)

Figure 1: Most of the Sudanese fighters in Libya come from the war-ravaged Darfur region



Source: TRT World Research Centre

In 2018, the internationally recognised government of Libya, signed an agreement along with Chad, Niger and Sudan to control and monitor their shared borders with the aim to curb the flow of foreign fighters into Libya (Relief Web, 2018). However, the GNA do not have much influence in the eastern part of Libya bordering Darfur, which is controlled by Haftar's LNA and other Libyan militias. For that reason, major Darfurian armed groups were able to establish a presence in Libya and engage in mercenary activities. According to a January 2019 letter addressed to the UN Security Council by the Panel of Experts on Sudan, Sudanese fighters in Libya comprise "some 800 to 1,000 fighters, with between 150 and 200 vehicles," (UN Security Council, 2019b). The fighters are aligned with Haftar's troops and are based mainly in the Jufra region, especially in the Hun and Zella areas. According to the Panel's report, in January 2020, five Darfurian armed groups were operating in Libya, mostly in support of Haftar. These include SLA/MM (Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minawi), SLA/TC (Sudan Liberation Movement-Transitional Council), GSLF (The Gathering of the Sudan Liberation Forces), SLA/AW (Sudan Liberation Army-Abdul Wahid), and JEM (Justice and Equality Movement). The report noted that these rebel groups maintain a significant presence across Libya, but mainly operate in three locations: (a) Ra's Lanuf (known as the "oil crescent" zone); (b) Hun military airport (Jufrah region); and (c) Zillah area (Jufrah region). In addition to helping Haftar's forces to capture and control new areas, the Sudanese mercenaries "seek to strengthen themselves by gaining money, arms and equipment... and have benefited from the vehicles, weaponry and other supplies, as well as the financial support, provided by the Libyan factions." The report further mentioned that "the payment for attacking and seizing new installations and property is higher than that for guarding the installations. After a successful attack, the fighters are allowed to retain the vehicles and property that they seize. Brokers pay up to \$3,000 for a new fighter to join one of the Libyan factions," (UN Security Council, 2020).

In addition to the opposition Sudanese Darfur rebels who have been part of his self-styled LNA militia for many years, Haftar recently started hiring members of pro-government Darfur paramilitaries. Following the removal of al-Bashir from power in April 2019, it was reported that hundreds of Sudanese fighters, some of them returning from the Yemen war, have crossed into Libya with the approval of authorities (i.e. the ruling

military) in Khartoum. In July 2019, the first batch of 1,000 fighters of a pledged 4,000-strong contingent of the Rapid Support Forces was deployed to Libya to back Haftar's assault on Tripoli. The exact number of Sudanese fighters in Libya remains unknown. However, In December 2019, reports indicated that an estimated 3,000 Sudanese mercenaries were fighting in the Libyan war (Burke and Salih, 2019). General Hemedti of the RSF has explained the role of his troops in the porous Sudan-Libya border as fighting "terrorism and illegal migration from North Africa to Europe... saving migrants and working in place of the EU," (Trew, 2019b).^{vi} With the possibility of a complete withdrawal from Yemen, state mercenarism in Libya, where the opposing rivals run short of manpower and are ready to outsource fighters, seems like a source of income for the mercenary RSF, which is now the de facto ruling power in Sudan. According to a \$6 million agreement between the Transitional Council of Sudan and Dickens and Madson, a Canadian lobbying firm, which also has links to Haftar and a record of past dealings in Libya, the Sudanese military rulers will receive funding from Haftar for the transfer of troops to Libya. Signed by General Hemedti on behalf of the Transitional Council of Sudan in May 2019, and recently indicated in public listings in the US, the deal proposes obtaining "funding for your Council from the Eastern Libyan Military Command in exchange for your military help to the Libyan National Army," (US Department of Justice, 2019). In January 2020, Sudanese families protested in front of the UAE embassy in Khartoum, demanding that Emirati authorities return their sons home. According to media reports, an Emirati company, Black Shield Security Services, allegedly told some 300 young Sudanese job seekers that they would work as security guards in the UAE. Yet, the recruits were detained in a training camp for three months and then sent to fight in Yemen and Libya against their will (Ahmed, 2020). Following the demonstrations, the Emirati firm repatriated around 50 Sudanese youths from Libya (Sudan Tribune, 2020).

As the almost one year offensive to seize the Libyan capital from the GNA has stalled, Haftar will likely resort to further recruitment of foreign fighters, mostly from Libya's Southern neighbours, including Sudan. In this regard, RSF commanders will continue to deploy their fighters to support Haftar. However, these mercenaries will likely record heavy losses on the battlefield, like Yemen (The New Arab, 2019). Such that scenario might result in pressure to return the fighters home.

Regional Implications

The presence of Sudanese fighters in Libya continues to contribute to the intricateness of the conflict and undermine efforts aimed at ending the crisis. However, the mercenaries further present an increasing risk to regional peace and security. The involvement of Sudanese fighters in the Libyan conflict has significant implications for Sudan's peace and stability. First, the Sudanese rebel groups who are fighting in Libya hold a strong potential to undermine peace efforts and reconciliation in Darfur. According to the Panel of Experts on the Sudan report in January 2020, almost all the major rebel groups from Darfur are operative in Libya. In addition to the mercenary activities, the Sudanese rebels in Libya are enriching themselves through trafficking, illegal trade and other forms of extortion. Although the current security situation in Sudan does not allow for the Libya-based Darfurian groups to launch large-scale guerilla operations in their home country, these rebels are reportedly preparing themselves militarily, hoping to re-enter Darfur and plan to conduct attacks against Sudanese security forces. As the financial and logistical support provided by South Sudan decreased over the years, the Libyan conflict makes a significant source of financing for these rebel groups. Once the Libyan crisis is resolved, the Sudanese rebel groups are likely to launch offensives in Darfur, therefore destabilising the region and undermining peace efforts. The Libyan crisis remains the major source of possible conflict spill over in Darfur.

Second, the involvement of the Rapid Support Forces in Libya could complicate the situation in Sudan given the RSF's role in the current transitional government. As mentioned, Mohammad Hamdan Dagalo, aka Hemedti, is considered to be the most powerful figure in post-Bashir Sudan. He is the commander of the feared RSF and Vice-President of Sudan's Sovereignty Council. This past November, the Sudanese army denied the RSF's participation in Libya's war (2019). However, Hemedti revealed that his forces are in Libya in January 2020. It remains to be seen whether the RSF is in Libya with the blessing of the Sudanese government, as seems to be the case in Yemen, or acting independently of it, thus underlining the fragmentation of Sudan's security sector. The latter case would hamper the country's three year-transition period by preventing Sudan's new administration led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdook to adopt a coherent policy towards Libya. The involvement of the RSF could divide the civilian

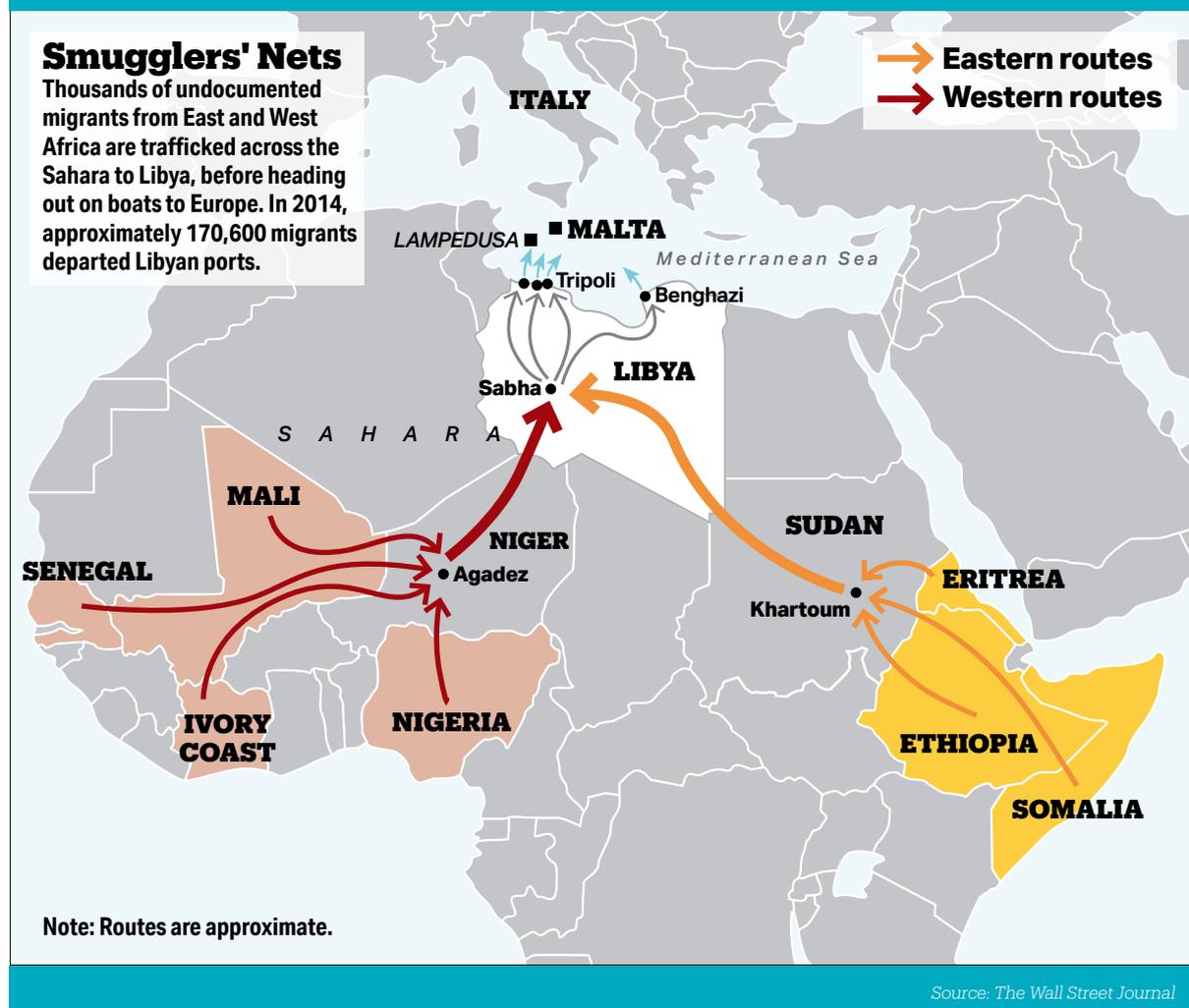
administration and the Transitional Military Council. There are already underlying differences between the military and civilian authorities as well as allegations that Hemedti is reportedly engineering the collapse of Hamdook's transitional government (Mashamoun, 2020). It is also unclear how RSF fighters' relations with Darfurian armed rebels, who are also supporting Haftar's LNA militia, will evolve. One dominant assumption is that the RSF will ultimately clash with the rebels, therefore further complicating the situation in Libya.

Furthermore, the involvement of the Sudanese fighters, both rebels and the RSF, in Libya have regional implications far beyond Sudan. For many years, the Darfur conflict has contributed to the crisis in neighbouring South Sudan, the Central African Republic as well as the stability of Chad. While the Darfur situation has evolved in a generally positive direction in the past few years, all of these countries remain vulnerable to political and economic instabilities in Darfur. Moreover, the presence of Sudanese and Chadian fighters in Libya could have serious ramifications on the neighbouring Sahel region—a part of Africa with porous borders and lawless havens where central government often do not maintain control over large swathes of territories within their formal borders. The movement of weapons and fighters from Libya in the early years of the conflict has resulted in the widespread violence in Mali in 2012 (Patrick, 2013). Since then, the Libyan crisis has added to the instability in the whole Sahel, especially the Burkina Faso-Mali-Niger tri-border area, with an increase in armed extremist groups, kidnappers, and smugglers taking advantage of the difficult situations in this vulnerable part of the African continent (Relief Web, 2017). These armed groups include Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Daesh (Islamic State) in the Greater Sahara and other violent groups engaged in extremism and organised crime. The Sudanese armed fighters, as well as other mercenaries involved in the Libyan civil war, could exacerbate the already precarious situation in the Sahel, therefore, further accelerating the fragmentation of the security sector and erosion of the state's authority. For this reason, the issue of the combatants and illegal weapons from Libya should garner attention as much as the concern given to the flow of foreign mercenaries into the conflict-ridden North African country.

Finally, the participation of Sudanese fighters in Libya's conflict could contribute to the growth of domestic militias and gangs that continue to profit from Libya's people-smuggling networks and the trafficking of migrants to Europe. Some of these criminal networks are affiliated with the Haftar's LNA, which is also accused of killing migrants. In July 2019, for instance, more than 40 people died and over 130 others were severely injured at a migrant detention centre in Tripoli after an airstrike widely blamed on Haftar's forces (Wintour, 2019). Before the attack, GNA Prime Minister Fayez al Serraj warned that close to a million migrants could reach European borders if Haftar's assault is not halted (Crawford, 2019). Since the beginning of the war in the North African country, Libya has become a

purgatory where migrants from Africa and some parts of the Middle East prepare to cross the Mediterranean en route to Europe. The instability in Libya has allowed smuggling networks to flourish, becoming a lucrative market trading desperate people like commodities. In early 2018, news reports emerged that African migrants captured in Libya ended up being sold as slaves by Libyan authorities and smugglers (Baker, 2019). The Sudanese fighters' presence on both sides of the border further contributes to this larger criminal networks and will continue to fuel instability and smuggling as the GNA and LNA factions lack both the resources and enough effective control to address the migrant smuggling problem.

Figure 2: Migrants routes to Libya



Conclusion

Following the deposal of Qaddafi in 2011, outside interventions have not only contributed to the conflict in the Libya, but have also presented a risk to regional security. Foreign militias and mercenaries, especially from neighbouring Sudan, operating in Libya have unprecedentedly proliferated in the past few years.

This paper discussed the mercenary nature of the Sudanese paramilitary groups' presence in Libya. In doing so, it noted that Sudanese armed groups are flocking to Libya, thus fuelling instability and posing a direct threat to the resolution of the Libyan conflict. The presence of the Sudanese militias on both sides of the border contributes to smuggling and human trafficking across the region between Sudan and Libya, and potentially to Europe. Additionally, the RSF's involvement in the current transitional government in Sudan might hamper the

ability of the Sudanese leadership to formalise an able policy towards the Libyan conflict. Furthermore, the divisive use of trans-border mercenaries could contribute to further instability in the war-torn Darfur region. Finally, the Sudanese militia's activities in Libya could contribute to further instability in Sudan's neighbours, including conflict-ridden South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Chad. The flow of combatants and weapons from the Libyan conflict could also further complicate the difficult conditions in Africa's Sahel region. Undoubtedly, the return of the Sudanese (as well as the Chadian) rebels to their home could have spill over impact on neighbouring countries as well as the Sahel region, thus further accelerating the fragmentation of security sector and erosion of the state authority.

Notes

ⁱ For example, looted properties, including pick-up cars, from Libya were sold in Tinah, a village in Sudan's Western region of Darfur. The trend or pattern for looting properties is not large in scale and not widely discussed in the local Sudanese media.

ⁱⁱ The main Darfur rebels were the Sudanese Liberation Movement (SLM), and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). They took up arms claiming marginalization from the Arab dominated Sudanese government.

ⁱⁱⁱ These are non-Arab civilians, particularly those from the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa communities.

^{iv} The other suspects are Ahmed Haroun, Sudan's Minister of State for Humanitarian Affairs, Ali Kushayb, senior Janjaweed commander, Abdallah Banda, Com-

mander-in-chief of the Justice and Equality Movement that fought against the government, and Abdel Rahim Mohammed Hussein, minister of the interior and the president's special representative in Darfur.

^v The First Sudanese Civil War was from 1955 to 1972

^{vi} It is extremely difficult for Hemedti to justify involvement of his troops in Libya publicly with the current context in Sudan. On several media appearances, including on Sudanese national TV, he claimed that the RSF are intercepting migrants on behalf of the European Union.

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