

Armament and Financing: How the Rapid Support Forces Built Their Power

From marginalized tribal militias summoned to confront insurgencies in Sudan's western Darfur region to a deeply entrenched political-military force at the heart of the country's power struggle, the evolution of the Janjaweed militia later rebranded as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) traces a trajectory from mercenaries on the periphery of conflict to a fully-fledged paramilitary organization wielding formidable influence.

Fueled by regional and international agendas, the RSF has become a proxy war apparatus plunging Sudan into an open war against civilians.

Despite its leaders' rhetoric about democracy, citizenship, and stability, those slogans have proven hollow against the grim reality of documented crimes: systematic killings, destruction of towns and villages, plunder of national wealth, and mass displacement. Sudan rich in resources has been bled dry, its lifeblood drained by conflict.

Through extreme pragmatism, the RSF has played all sides: pledging loyalty to the regime to infiltrate state structures, presenting itself as the protector of revolutionaries, and serving the ambitions of its commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemeti), a former camel trader turned warlord and power broker in a blood-soaked national landscape.

Militia Origins and Tribal Roots

Until 2003, the name "Rapid Support Forces" was unknown in Sudanese public discourse. These were initially disparate Arab-dominated tribal militias known collectively as the Janjaweed, reportedly formed by the Mahamid clan of the Arab Rizeigat tribe, led by Musa Hilal Hemeti's cousin.

With the eruption of rebellion in Darfur in 2003, the Sudanese government, facing military failure and reluctance from the army to engage directly, turned to the Janjaweed for help. The militias participated actively but committed horrific atrocities: killings, arson, looting that sparked global condemnation.

In 2004, UN Security Council Resolution 1556 demanded the Sudanese government disarm the Janjaweed and prosecute its leaders, including Musa Hilal, who was later accused in 2006 of obstructing the peace process and subjected to travel bans and asset freezes.

By 2007, Hemeti, then a senior Janjaweed commander, rebelled against Khartoum over unpaid wages, engaging in armed clashes with the army that claimed numerous lives. Instead of punishing him, President Omar al-Bashir

controversially co-opted Hemeti by offering back pay, officer ranks for his men, and granting Hemeti the rank of brigadier.

In 2013, Bashir formally legalized the militias by presidential decree, rebranding them as the RSF under the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). The military, however, opposed this subordination to the intelligence agency.

In 2017, Sudan's parliament passed a law defining the RSF as a national military force under army command. But in 2019, this law was amended, removing the RSF's subordination to the military, granting it vast legal and operational independence.

Military Might

The RSF today is one of Sudan's most powerful armed factions, with unofficial estimates placing its strength between 60,000 and 100,000 fighters, including officers and non-commissioned personnel. With forces deployed across the country particularly concentrated in Khartoum and Darfur it boasts broad operational reach.

Its arsenal reportedly includes nearly 10,000 armored pickup trucks armed with light and medium machine guns, anti-aircraft weapons, and light armored vehicles such as BTRs for convoy and site security. The RSF's strategic foothold along Sudan's borders with Libya and Eritrea allows it to maintain alternative supply routes outside state oversight.

Sources of Funding

The RSF's financial network spans local and foreign sources, with Sudanese gold as a primary revenue stream, supplemented by regional and international support. This has enabled its transformation into a semi-autonomous military-economic power.

1. Gold Revenues: Since the mid-2010s, the RSF has taken control of gold mines in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and northern Sudan. Reports estimate that between 2014 and 2016, it generated \$123 million from these mines. A UN panel estimated gold smuggled to the UAE from 2010 to 2014 was worth over \$4.5 billion.

The UAE's Kaloti refinery reportedly acquired more than 117 tons of Sudanese gold between 2012 and 2019. This informal trade allowed the RSF to build a shadow economy, with the Hemeti family-run company Al Junaid playing a central role.

2. Yemen War Revenues: After Bashir's fall, Hemeti deposited \$225 million into a Sudanese central bank account, claiming it came from gold revenues and wages for his forces deployed in Yemen alongside the Saudi-Emirati coalition. This

foreign deployment significantly bolstered the RSF's financial and military capacities, with UAE support proving pivotal in acquiring advanced equipment later used in domestic conflicts.

3. EU Migration Funds: The RSF's involvement in cross-border security expanded to include anti-illegal migration operations under the EU's "Khartoum Process," offering it political cover and indirect financial support.

Yemen as a Proving Ground

Hemeti secured Gulf backing through the RSF's involvement in Yemen starting in 2015, with 30,000 fighters deployed under various tasks. Reports suggest this was part of a direct UAE-Hemeti agreement involving Emirati funding in exchange for RSF participation.

The New York Times revealed that about 40% of the RSF troops in Yemen were child soldiers aged 14 to 17, raising international outrage. These troops were grouped into units of 500–750, with monthly wages ranging from \$480 to \$530, depending on rank and age.

The Fall of Bashir

When mass protests erupted in December 2018, President Bashir turned to Hemeti and the RSF for salvation, as he had during earlier crises in Darfur. But this time, Hemeti read the shifting political winds and chose to side with the protesters, not out of democratic conviction but as a calculated move to preserve his power.

He emerged as one of the biggest beneficiaries of Bashir's ouster in April 2019, securing a position as deputy chairman of the Transitional Sovereign Council and rising as a dominant figure in Sudan's new power structure.

The Khartoum Massacre

In June 2019, a fragile alliance between the RSF and the army descended into brutality as both forces violently dispersed a massive civilian sit-in at army headquarters in Khartoum. Dozens were killed and hundreds injured in what became known as the Khartoum Massacre.

Hemeti faced direct accusations of orchestrating the violence, but calls for accountability were met with official silence. This cemented the military's unwillingness to cede power and deepened distrust between armed and civilian forces.

The 2021 Coup

Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok sought to sideline the military and RSF from politics, aiming for full civilian rule. In response, Hemeti joined army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan in staging a coup on October 25, 2021. The coup shattered

hopes for a democratic transition and reignited mass protests.

Hemeti later expressed regret, calling the coup a mistake but this confession came too late, with irreparable damage done to Sudan's democratic aspirations and relations with al-Burhan deteriorating into open rivalry.

Rising Tensions and Civil War

Despite public displays of unity, tensions between the army and RSF simmered beneath the surface. A proposed framework agreement for a two-year civilian transition collapsed over disputes regarding the integration of the RSF into the regular army.

International mediation efforts failed to bridge the divide. In March 2023, talks between both sides ended without resolution. As diplomacy faltered, preparations for war accelerated, culminating in full-scale conflict as the RSF launched attacks on army positions in Khartoum and beyond.

The Generals' War

The power struggle devolved into open warfare, with the RSF capturing dozens of military sites. Tens of thousands have been killed, hundreds of thousands injured, and millions displaced. External backing especially from the UAE has sustained the RSF, providing logistical and financial lifelines.

This foreign support turned the RSF into a formidable rival to Sudan's traditional army, dragging the war into a protracted stalemate. The national army, hampered by sanctions and outdated equipment, faces a proxy force supported by both the UAE and Russia, with no clear end in sight.

The El Fasher Massacre

As the RSF suffered setbacks in Khartoum and elsewhere, it turned to El Fasher, capital of Darfur, as a new front. In May 2024, the RSF laid siege to the city, home to over 250,000 civilians, triggering a humanitarian catastrophe. Aid convoys were blocked, water and medical supplies dwindled, and indiscriminate shelling decimated neighborhoods.

The city now endures constant clashes, a collapsed healthcare system, and mass displacement. El Fasher has become emblematic of the RSF's brutal tactics and the unbearable toll of this conflict on civilians.

This historical account underscores the RSF's destructive role in deepening Sudan's humanitarian crisis. From Darfur to Khartoum and El Fasher, its actions have plunged the country into chaos.

No longer a mere local militia, the RSF has evolved into a proxy force manipulating external support to pursue power, leaving the state powerless to protect its citizens. As the civilian death toll rises and institutions crumble,



Sudan's dream of a democratic transition lies buried beneath rubble and bloodshed—abandoned by a complicit regional and global community.

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