

# RSF's Battle Successes in Sudan: The Consequences of Legitimizing Hemedti

by [Areej Elhag \(/experts/areej-elhag\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Areej Elhag \(/experts/areej-elhag\)](#)

Areej Elhag is a journalist and researcher in international relations and national security.

 Brief Analysis

## The group's success on the battlefield against the Sudanese armed forces is riven by Hemedti's personal aspirations bolstered by regional players that see him as a new ally in a future Sudanese state.

Since the first day of the Khartoum battle, the rapid advancement of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) surprised many who had underestimated the group's capabilities. Now, bolstered by the pre-war legitimization of its leadership and its military advancement in the war raging since April, the RSF is close to seizing control over all of Sudan.

### Domestic Legitimation of the RSF

Although the RSF has repeatedly stated since the early days of the war that its primary goal is to establish and support democracy—not to rule Sudan—the crimes and violations it commits on the ground cannot be categorized as support for civilian rule. Rather, the RSF has become a source of terror among many Sudanese, who have suffered from killing, displacement, theft, and rape.

The Sudanese people now face a powerful force, with a poor reputation both locally and internationally, advancing on the ground while still recruiting mercenaries from inside and outside the country. In contrast, the Sudanese army has lost many strategic locations in the center and west of the country to the militia. The future approach of the RSF, both in the field and politically, remains unclear to most Sudanese, but are real concerns that Sudan might slide into a quagmire of a protracted civil war. Looking back, however, the military successes of the RSF can be traced to several interrelated factors.

Thanks to the succession of political failures in Sudan, the RSF transformed from a militia into a paramilitary force recognized by the country's parliament in 2015. A law, passed in the Sudanese parliament during Omar al-Bashir's era, made the RSF a regular and legal force and secured its place in Sudan's political sphere.

After RSF head Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, succeeded in entering Khartoum after having previously been confined to the outskirts, he began to act and work like a statesman. He cooperated with army leadership and attracted a number of supporters from among them. In fact, many competent army leaders themselves requested to be assigned to the RSF due to the financial benefits it offered, explaining the RSF's current military superiority in battles.

After the 2019 revolution that led to Bashir's ousting, Hemedti became the second most powerful man in the country due to an alliance between himself and the Security Committee managing the security and political scene of post-Bashir Sudan. This alliance ensured the success of the military coup against Bashir and at that point guaranteed Hemedti's loyalty to the Security Committee, which later transformed into the transitional military council.

This alliance granted the RSF a kind of privilege and moral legitimacy at the time, suggesting that it played a key role in the success of the December revolution and that without its alignment with the army leadership, the revolution would not have succeeded. However, the social foundation for this legitimacy was and remains absent. Many voices in the Sudanese streets, especially in demonstrations, call for the dissolution of the RSF.

### The Growth of Hemedti's International Profile

Yet with a new status and legitimacy within Khartoum, the RSF began asserting itself as a powerful political actor. Visitors arriving in the capital, including Western and U.S. envoys who previously refused to meet with Bashir, found it important to meet Hemedti. Meeting Hemedti became a priority in their political engagements during visits to Sudan, apparently overlooking or ignoring the RSF's previous involvement in the genocide in Darfur. This local and international legitimacy has been fundamental in morally strengthening the RSF and motivating its actions. It is also the source of its military and strategic strength, due to Hemedti's personal relationships and alliances. These relationships strengthen the RSF's political influence and fuel Hemedti's ambition to rule Sudan.

Now, as a natural consequence of the conflict that has unfolded after the alliance between Hemedti and the security forces led by Burhan disintegrated, Sudan is witnessing a significant displacement of citizens from their cities and villages as soon as they learn that the RSF is approaching, fearing for their lives and properties due to the RSF's reputation for brutality.

Hemedti has worked to establish important connections with a number of Sudan's neighboring countries or forces within them, including [Ethiopia](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudanese-paramilitary-leader-hemedti-meets-civilian-leaders-tour-2024-01-01/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudanese-paramilitary-leader-hemedti-meets-civilian-leaders-tour-2024-01-01/>), [Libya](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/23/libyan-warlord-could-plunge-sudan-into-a-drawn-out-nightmare-conflict) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/23/libyan-warlord-could-plunge-sudan-into-a-drawn-out-nightmare-conflict>), [Central African Republic](https://adf-magazine.com/2023/05/sudans-connections-with-car-chad-could-cause-conflict-to-spread/) (<https://adf-magazine.com/2023/05/sudans-connections-with-car-chad-could-cause-conflict-to-spread/>), in addition to regional powers like [Kenya](#)

(<https://www.barrons.com/news/sudan-s-rsf-chief-in-kenya-on-latest-leg-of-regional-tour-9eaa0f5c>) and Israel (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-in-contact-with-sudans-leaders-trying-to-help-calm-fighting-official-says/>). In contrast, the Sudanese army has had **good relations** (<https://adf-magazine.com/2023/10/al-burhan-tries-shuttle-diplomacy-to-achieve-what-has-failed-militarily/>) with Egypt (<https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2023/08/29/egypt-reaffirms-support-for-sudan-amid-crisis-al-burhan-visits-cairo/>), Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, Qatar, Turkey, and Djibouti, plus Russia—although relations with the latter deteriorated after the outbreak of the April 15 war, leading Russia and its Wagner Forces to **instead support** ([https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rc=j&q=&resrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjj1Lbu68GDaxVIOEQIHxD0AHOQFnoECBgQAQ&url=https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/20/africa/wagner-sudan-russia-libya-intl/index.html&usg=AOvVaw12WRC4KAev7s\\_6-fnO91iv&opi=89978449](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rc=j&q=&resrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjj1Lbu68GDaxVIOEQIHxD0AHOQFnoECBgQAQ&url=https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/20/africa/wagner-sudan-russia-libya-intl/index.html&usg=AOvVaw12WRC4KAev7s_6-fnO91iv&opi=89978449)) the RSF.

Some of these extant relations have had a significant impact on the war, including via strategic and military support to the RSF. In particular, reports confirm the involvement of Russian military personnel and the Wagner Group in the April 15 war and gold smuggling. Additionally, in countries like Kenya, Libya, the **Central African Republic** (<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rc=j&q=&resrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjt9YlB7MGDAXUvIEQIHcAJDmEQFnoECAwQAQ&url=https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-russias-wagner-group-doing-africa&usg=AOvVaw039yZgnVf2B-117XuIARBe&opi=89978449>), and **Chad** (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-intelligence-points-to-wagner-plot-against-key-western-ally-in-africa-29867547>), governments or opposition groups have relationships with Wagner, reflecting increasing Russian involvement and importance in Africa.

The RSF currently enjoys not only Russian support—which became exclusive after April 15—but also benefits from the perception in Sudan that there is indirect European and American support, as manifested in a lack of response to its atrocities, displacement, killing, and rape. No significant actions have been taken by European countries or the United States, except for some mild sanctions against secondary figures.

A report published in *The Times* detailed how Hemedti acquired surface-to-air missiles from military bases in the neighboring Central African Republic in April and May last year. A UN official said that Wagner provided those missiles, and two Sudanese officials stated that these missiles were used to shoot down several Sudanese fighter jets belonging to the army.

Local pictures have also surfaced showing the use of Israeli-made LAR-160 smart artillery missiles, used in several countries including Georgia, Romania, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Venezuela, Argentina, and Chile, and now used by the RSF in Sudan, further fueling local speculation that Israel is likewise supporting the RSF in spite of official Israeli claims of neutrality.

In contrast, the Sudanese army—**accused of being politically ideological and controlled by Islamists** <sup>0</sup>, finds itself increasingly isolated. Moreover, the de-facto foreign ministry of Sudan imposed by army leader Abdel Fattah al-Burhan during the military takeover of a prior joint military-civilian transition government lacks the necessary diplomatic finesse in these circumstances. Hemedti and his advisory team took advantage of this, establishing parallel independent relationships that have borne fruit in the subsequent contest between the two sides.

Hemedti's recent travel and meetings have underscored this effort. It was expected that Burhan would meet Hemedti in Djibouti in December in a meeting sponsored by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in East Africa to achieve peace in Sudan. However, due to technical reasons as stated by IGAD, Hemedti apologized for not attending, and it was agreed to hold the meeting in early January. On the same evening, Hemedti appeared in Uganda at the home of President Yoweri Museveni.

When he arrived in Addis Ababa, Hemedti met with the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, then met the former Sudanese Prime Minister and head of the Leadership Authority of the "Coordination of Civil Democratic Forces (Progress)" Abdullah Hamdok, along with several leaders of the coordination. This meeting, initiated by Hamdok, resulted in a joint political declaration including understandings, such as forming a joint committee to end the war and prioritizing humanitarian issues. Many news outlets have described this meeting as weakening and tightening the noose on Burhan by the civil force, which has emerged from this meeting as an influential power.

Hemedti then traveled to Djibouti to meet its President Ismail Omar Guelleh, followed by Nairobi to meet the Kenyan President William Ruto. His visits were not limited to regional countries but extended to South Africa, where he was received by President Cyril Ramaphosa. This non-regional visit is considered strategic to seek international and regional legitimacy in a country like South Africa, which is also a member of the global economic group BRICS, which included Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. On August 24, 2023, during the BRICS summit held in his country, the South African President announced the acceptance of six new countries into BRICS: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Argentina, Ethiopia, and Iran. The group's name will change to "BRICS Plus" in January 2024.

These visits, expected to be followed by visits to other countries, are conducted by Hemedti as a political leader seeking peace and an end to the war. Meanwhile, his forces continue to fight. According to reports from the U.S. State Department, these forces attack civilians and are accused of violations, including killing, theft, and rape. Nevertheless, the civil force represented by "Progress", considers them their best ally. Its leaders prefer these forces to dominate the political scene, in addition to the army, which is considered untrustworthy and infiltrated by a group of Islamists "Al-Kizan". One senior member of the civil force, who spoke to me but refused to disclose his name, believes that the RSF is the best and future option for a non-ideological army to protect Sudan, unlike the current army. The civil forces are confident that they will reach an agreement with them to end the war and make them subordinate to a future democratic civilian state.

### **The Sudanese Military: Divided and Disorganized**

When analyzing the Sudanese army's hierarchy and battle readiness, it becomes clear that the military is plagued by a host of deeply rooted structural issues. From a lack of discipline to internal political disputes to competing interests and loyalties, the army is grappling with systematic challenges that go a long way towards explaining their ineffectiveness on the battlefield.

Regarding the military ammunition for the Sudanese army, it is subject to sanctions by the Security Council under Resolution 1591 since 2005. This includes an arms embargo due to the army's involvement in the Darfur conflict in the western part of the country, a key factor that has weakened the military.

Additionally, personal interests and political infighting are endemic problems that undermine the Sudanese army's ability to combat the RSF. Leaders of this institution have immersed themselves in politics and various business endeavors, and many of its members have interests other than protecting the nation and its citizens. Therefore, the most prominent problems the army faced are the shifting of loyalties, inaction, and the transition of many soldiers to the ranks of the RSF, which pays its troops more. For example, high ranking army leaders requested to be assigned to work with the RSF before the outbreak of hostilities. Currently, there are a number of officers who were part of the Sudanese army and are now fighting in the ranks of the RSF, including Major General Osman Mohamed Hamed.

The army's strategy in the war has been defensive, not offensive, and it is accused of not factoring the protection of the Sudanese citizen into its strategy or objectives. Eight months after the outbreak of the war, the average Sudanese citizen has lost most of their trust in their army, as it has mostly appeared confused, retreating, and making fatal mistakes that have led to the deaths of dozens of citizens in several cities witnessing clashes.

It should be noted that the military suffers from intelligence failures and political infiltration across the board, with few efforts being taken to curb the RSF's growing power in the capital. All indicators and reports emphasized the dangers of the RSF inside Khartoum and the possibility of clashes in the capital, in addition to the danger of having their headquarters and barracks inside residential areas. The military's intelligence failure not only allowed the entrenchment of the RSF in Khartoum but also allowed it to expand its influence on other areas of the country, which was one of the main factors for its success in this war. Despite owning the qualitative striking force, the Sudanese army's aerial superiority has not been as effective as hoped, with the RSF militias shooting down several MiG fighter jets using anti-aircraft weapons like the American-made SAM 7.

The RSF demonstrates superiority not just in strategic planning but in clear logistical advancement. If Wadi Seidna military base—the main air base in central Sudan located north of Omdurman—falls, it would mean the air force, which the army entirely relies on in its advance against the militias, would be out of the equation and give RSF the firm upper hand on the ground.

### **The Rapid Support Forces: Lacking a Clear Leadership Structure, but Fighting with a Clear Vision**

Contrary to the Sudanese military's stagnation and clumsy approach to the war, the RSF has been able to adapt and create dynamic strategies in order to forge alliances with local and international actors. Each area the RSF controls is managed in a way that suits its social conditions.

In the months since the outbreak of the war, the RSF refined its intelligence capabilities, primarily due an influx of logistical support for regional powers. Reports indicate that the RSF has the ability to use satellite imagery obtained through its relationship with Wagner. According to *Agence France-Presse*, Wagner mercenaries purchased two high-precision surveillance satellites from Chang Guang Satellite Technology (CGST), a Chinese company specializing in satellite technology. This technology enabled Wagner to acquire satellite images of Ukraine and areas in Africa where its mercenaries are active, including Libya, Sudan, Central African Republic, and Mali, according to the same reports. It is worth mentioning that the RSF also has the ability to spy on army movements through more advanced and effective means than satellite imagery. Last year, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2022-11-30/ty-article-magazine/.premium/jet-linked-to-israeli-spyware-tycoon-brings-spy-tech-from-eu-to-notorious-sudanese-militia/00000184-a9f4-dd96-ad8c-ebfcd8330000?lts=1704303365746>) that the RSF acquired spying technologies provided by an Israeli company.

The RSF adopts the street warfare method used by independent gangs in its attacks to control strategic locations. It deliberately kills as a means to intimidate citizens with the aim of looting their properties and displacing them from their homes. This method is often confusing for regular forces. What is surprising in the Sudanese case is that the army is being defeated by militias that it historically has experience combatting. The Sudanese army has not fought outside Sudan in the past seventy years; all of its combat experience came from operations in outlying provinces or focused on quelling demonstrations in the capital. Despite this long history of civil conflict, the army is currently retreating before forces that it is supposed to know everything about, given the previously close relationship between the army and the RSF in the past.

One example is Wad Madani in east central Sudan and the extreme ease with which it fell. According to local sources, elements of the RSF infiltrated neighborhoods as civilians, formed sleeper cells, and changed into their militia uniforms for the attack. Sources indicated that the leader of the attacking force known as Abu Aqla Heikal, who belongs to one of the large tribes that form a significant population in Wad Madani and its surroundings, bought the loyalty of some army officers and soldiers after declaring his allegiance to the RSF. Heikal joined along with the elements of the "North Shield" militia he formed a year earlier under the pretext of protecting Northern Sudan from the threat of RSF. At that time, he declared his loyalty to Burhan, who did not object to forming this force and provided it with the necessary logistical support.

These interconnected regional factors make the RSF a force on a growing political and military power that will be difficult to stop. The group's success on the battlefield against the Sudanese armed forces is riven by Hemedti's personal aspirations bolstered by regional players that see him as a new ally in a future Sudanese state.

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