

Iran in Sudan: Fears of a Sudanese Popular Mobilization Forces

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Jan 31, 2024

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Brief Analysis

Given the ways in which Iranian influence has grown elsewhere in the region, there are fears that the Sudanese army, with its Islamist orientation, will morph into a militia group similar to the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, ultimately exerting Iran's will in exchange for funding and military support.

After a video spread showing elements of the Rapid Support Forces carrying the wreckage of an Iranian-made drone, observers fear the return of the former Sudanese regime to the scene, along with the regime's longtime extremist allies who were the reason for Sudan's international isolation and its placement on the UN and international sanctions list for three decades.

Bloomberg reported that Iran is supplying the Sudanese army with shipments of weapons and "Mohajer 6" drones made in Iran. This influx of military hardware highlights Iran's interest in Sudan, a Red Sea nation with maritime borders extending to about 670 km. By controlling Sudanese ports, Iran and its allies would gain a foothold in a critically important commercial corridor with proximity to Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

With the war in Sudan dragging on with no solution in sight, foreign actors are hedging their bets on various factions in order to gain influence in the volatile country. Control of the Islamic Movement axis, known as "Kizan," is a coveted means of gaining influence for Iran and its allies, especially after the suspension of the Jeddah platform and the halt of negotiations to end the war following the Sudanese government's rejection of the IGAD initiative, which it described as "biased towards the Rapid Support and its leader Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo."

Army Commander Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who has made the east of the country his capital, specifically in Port Sudan overlooking the Red Sea, faces accusations of being supported by Islamist leaders from the previous regime of Omar al Bashir, with many believing they are the actual masterminds of the war. This group, known as "Kizan," still maintains relations with Iran, and its former ideologue and leader Hassan al-Turabi is among

its loyalists.

Historically, there has always been a strong relationship between Sudan's Kizan and other Islamist organizations in the region, such as Hamas, Al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah. Likewise, Sudan itself—under the rule of the Sudanese Islamic Movement led by Turabi and President Bashir since 1989—maintained a close relationship with Iran. This allegiance continued until January 2016, when it was "publicly" severed in response to the storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Now, after the Riyadh-Tehran settlement, these tensions have subsided, and interest-based relations between Iran and its traditional partners in Sudan has resumed.

In reality, it is likely that this relationship continued informally even during this tense period, as several individuals involved with the Islamic Movement have connections outside Sudan, including with Qatar and Iran, even during the cool period between Tehran and Khartoum. For example, Egyptian authorities recently arrested businessman Abdel Basit Hamza in Cairo, a close associate of former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and his party. The U.S. State Department designated Hamza as a global terrorist, claiming that he provided financial support to Hamas amounting to about 20 million dollars, suggesting that Sudan's ties to outside militant groups was never completely severed.

In a move considered by many to be a rekindling of old relationships, the Sudanese government announced in October 2023 that Iran and Sudan "discussed restoring bilateral relations between the two countries and accelerating the steps to reopen embassies between them." Media reported that "Tehran received a promise from leaders associated with the Islamic Movement to cooperate with it and facilitate the extension of its influence in the Red Sea if it provided generous military support to the army to help it withstand the war."

What makes the future in this case darker is Sudan's history of hosting extremists and jihadists from the far right and far left. During the previous regime, Sudan hosted Osama bin Laden, leader of Al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Carlos the Jackal. This warm embrace of violent extremists earned Sudan a spot on the list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Given the ways in which Iranian influence has grown elsewhere in the region, there are fears that the Sudanese army, with its Islamist orientation, will morph into a militia group similar to the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, ultimately exerting Iran's will in exchange for funding and military support. These fears are particularly exacerbated after calls by the Sudanese army to arm citizens and organize for "popular resistance" by opening the field for individuals to purchase weapons.

The Sudanese army's stronghold in the east is the area most vulnerable to Iranian influence. The presence of the Beja and their support for the Islamist Movement and the army is one of the most significant factors making Port Sudan a comfortable place and a good start for controlling the port. The head of the Supreme Council of Beja Nazirs and Independent Chieftains, Nazir Mohamed Al-Amin Turk, is a member of the National Congress Party and the Islamic Movement, and currently, he is one of the supporters of the Sudanese army and Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

The Beja tribes in eastern Sudan faced neglect and disregard for their legitimate demands under the rule of the ousted president, Omar al-Bashir, such as economic reform and achieving political representation in the eastern region. They became a prominent challenge facing the transitional government after the overthrow of al-Bashir, even before the conflict between the army and the Rapid Support Forces erupted. The tribes once again emphasized their lack of effective representation in the transitional government institutions.

Mohamed Al-Amin Turk, head of the "Supreme Council of the Beja Nazirs and Independent Chieftaincies," led several tribes in eastern Sudan that rejected the peace process in the Juba Agreement, which was made between the previous transitional government and the armed movements. Their rejection was due to their marginalization and

the selection of parties that do not represent the region for negotiations. These tribes threatened to establish the state of Beja in the east, with the council announcing its intention "to declare the state of Beja," accompanied by a new timeline for a comprehensive closure in the eastern part of the country. The conflict between the east and the center escalated more than once with the closure of Port Sudan and the road to Khartoum. The council even closed the port in September 2022 as a protest against the signing of the "Framework Agreement" internationally supported between the Central Council for Freedom and Change "CCFC" and the military component, accusing the government of misrepresentation and neglecting their demands.

In addition to the Beja, there are military battalions affiliated with the army that have an Islamist character. For example, the Special Operations Forces, which are part of the army, consist of intelligence, commandos, and special forces. There are active Islamist blocs in regions like Kassala State and Khartoum, where they post photos on social media showing their presence in Omdurman and conducting operations in Shendi, north of Khartoum. A number of battalions, such as the Sudanese Popular Resistance in the Red Sea State, participate in the political efforts to unite military and political leaders with the same Islamist interest. These groups emphasize the readiness of the reserve forces to work in various areas, focusing on protecting the eastern gateway.

Whether Sudan's situation is a repetition of scenarios that have occurred in the region or a different scenario from its predecessors, it is important to recognize that the presence of extremist military groups in Sudan and the enhancement of their status will not only have an impact within its borders but will also be a point from which they may expand to the surrounding areas. ❖

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