



# SSR's Most Daunting Detractors in Sudan

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Avril 2024

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## African Security Sector Network (ASSN)

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Article available online at:

<https://bit.ly/ASSN59>

To cite this article:

Tadesse (M.), « **SSR's Most Daunting Detractors in Sudan.** », *ASSN*, Avril 2024.



## Table des matières

|                                                               |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS .....                              | 4  |
| ABSTRACT .....                                                | 5  |
| INTRODUCTION .....                                            | 6  |
| A COUNTRY OF WARS AND PEACE AGREEMENTS .....                  | 6  |
| A CHRONICLE OF ABORTIVE DDRs.....                             | 8  |
| THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL TWIST: OLD AND NEW POWERS IN SUDAN ..... | 11 |



## Abbreviations and acronyms

|       |                                                                |
|-------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| AU    | : African Union                                                |
| CPA   | : Comprehensive Peace Agreement                                |
| CSDP  | : Common Security and Defence Policy                           |
| DDR   | : Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration               |
| DPA   | : Darfur Peace Agreement                                       |
| EU    | : European Union                                               |
| EUTF  | : European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa               |
| IDPs. | : Internally Displaced Persons                                 |
| IGAD  | : Intergovernmental Authority on Development in Eastern Africa |
| JPA   | : Juba Peace Agreement                                         |
| MS    | : Member States                                                |
| NCP   | : National Congress Party                                      |
| RSF   | : Rapid Support Forces                                         |
| SAF   | : Sudanese Armed Forces                                        |
| SSR   | : Security Sector Reform                                       |
| T&E   | : Train and Equip                                              |
| UAE   | : United Arab Emirates                                         |

## Abstract

Sudan is now at war, with two rival armies determined to finish each other. Disagreements over the nature, timing and conduct of Security Sector Reform/SSR/ has often been blamed for the war. But realities on the ground don't support that. For one thing, SSR has never been seriously attempted in Sudan. Second, external actors have never been interested in making SSR a priority. Third, intergovernmental institutions and Western governments particularly the European Union worked against SSR by supporting a militia force and repurposed security sector programmes to its own hard security interests. Lastly, new, "middle and meddling" powers made sure that SSR and political transition should not take root in Sudan, even it must be defeated. However, the most ominous role has been played by Western powers. Driven by short term security interests, influence peddling, and ideological decay Western powers mainly the Europeans were at least as important as the country's official political and military leaderships in frustrating SSR and democratic transition in Sudan. This is symptomatic of SSR getting increasingly little or zero attention in international policy making, a harbinger of a broader, long-term trend in which Western powers abandon SSR policy agendas-even at the level of rhetoric- and work with and support all types of security actors in Africa from a new standing. Nonetheless, the crisis of Sudanese security institutions is rooted in a longer-standing history and rapid national and regional political shifts in recent years.

## Introduction

In April 2023, a war broke out in Sudan between the Sudanese army and a paramilitary group named the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Since then, the conflict has expanded to the Darfur region and instantly spread to the rest of the country. As the conflict deepens, humanitarian conditions are [declining](#), and the promise of a negotiated peace and a long-awaited democratic transition diminishes. Unlike most of the [academics and media reports](#) who maintain that disagreements over Security Sector Reform/SSR/have led to the war, it will be contended here that partly to blame is the conduct of external actors particularly European and Gulf and Middle Eastern powers. This paper discusses how, despite the several peace agreements and opportunities opened over the years, political transition has never been a priority to both domestic players and their external partners forming a colloquium of missed opportunities for SSR. Principally, it showcases how SSR has been the least of the concerns for the warring parties and international mediators.

The paper aims to situate the entire discussion into the broader aspects of security governance in Sudan since independence and how this militates against both democratic transformation and the integration and reform of the security sector. This takes a particular form shaped by the post-2019 revolution and the current war, which has intensified some pre-war dynamics and trends weakening the prospect of SSR in significant ways.

In the interest of coherence and emphasis I will not discuss conflicts in Sudan in detail, I would rather focus on the attempts made (or the lack of it) at DDR SSR over the years in the context of peace agreements and directly pivot to the internal and external national and regional developments that led to the war. The paper therefore focuses on these developments particularly the geopolitical and global factors that negatively affected the prospect for democratic political transition in Sudan in order both to gain analytical insight and traction and to capture an emerging national and regional trend of considerable political significance for ensuring peace as well as promoting or undermining SSR in “political transitions”. Notably, the practices of Gulf powers and Western-led institutions and governments can serve as a prism to measure failure as well as impact on the conduct of SSR and how they do depart from and challenge the conventional approaches to peacebuilding within which democratizing security institutions has been politically accommodated. Fundamentally, it discusses the external aspects of the war to reveal how foreign and security policy and the return of militarized politics at the regional level explain the particular ways in which SSR has lost allies becoming a failed or forgotten project in Sudan

## A country of wars and peace agreements

The dispute over how to integrate the Rapid Support Forces/RSF/ into regular army ranks as well as broader issues surrounding the [reform of the security sector](#) is claimed to be the most proximate trigger of the fighting which broke out in Sudan on April 15, 2023, but competing for control over the state and the economy and a range of historical and ideological disputes underlie this conflict. The key protagonists are the Sudanese Armed Forces/SAF/ under Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces/RSF/ under Hamdan Dagalo or often referred to as Hemetti. The pair were respectively leader and deputy leader of a

transitional government which was supposed to hand over to a civilian administration after the 2019 ousting of the former president, Omar al-Bashir. The ongoing war in Sudan (including the history of failed political transitions and SSR) constituted the climax of a three-pronged political crisis, one that stemmed from the peculiar nature of the Sudanese state, the dynamics of Sudan's civil war and abortive DDR processes and the role of external actors in peace-making and political transition.

Successive Sudanese governments particularly the regime of President Omar al-Bashir, from which leaders of the Sudanese Armed Forces arose, have been using militias and paramilitary forces to control rebellions and govern most of Sudanese regions. There has been a history of authoritarian rulers in Africa setting up and using militia groups to counter possible military insurrection to a certain degree but in Sudan they have been the main weapon of war against the peripheries, all the way from South Sudan to Darfur. Prominent example is the RSF which began as a militia movement, that evolved from the disparate Janjaweed militias that carried out the genocidal counterinsurgency policy of the Sudanese regime in Darfur that began in 2003. It was set up by al-Bashir, who ruled Sudan from 1989 until April 2019 when he was deposed by the army after months of popular protest against his regime. How did a group initially formed as an auxiliary for a previous dictatorship become a serious player in both business and government after the war, a peculiar phenomenon? What happens when the states' auxiliary instrument of war rebel against the state in all its forms? It is perhaps in these two areas of concern that the crisis of the Sudanese security sector is located highlighting the fact that the troubles of the security sector in Sudan is rooted in governance and counter-insurgency practices inherited from the NCP regime (1989-2019). This raises urgent questions about the immediate future of Sudan and the longer-term trend of security sector fragmentation on the continent.

To preserve the violent and rapacious nature of center-periphery relations in the country the Sudanese government has always relied on a plethora of militia groups to counter insurgencies. This relationship, inherited from the Ottoman, has been extremely rapacious, based on violent exploitation of the peripheries. Thus, a key theoretical assumption interms of analysing the historical causes of the war and crisis of the security sector in Sudan is the violent and extractive governance built on extreme rapaciousness of center-periphery relations. Post-independence Sudanese leaders, broadly the Sudanese elite particularly the National Congress Party/NCP of Omar al-Bashir reproduced this mode of government, adopting the same political culture that the occupiers left behind making violent conflicts and wars in all Sudanese territories overly predetermined. No wonder, Sudan is home to one of the longest civil wars in Africa. No wonder, all attempts at peace-making failed to achieve any results. The international communities' misguided approaches did not help either. The roots of Sudan's problems didn't lie in the country's many peripheries, but in the center. By facilitating the signing of stand-alone peace agreements between the leaders in Khartoum and regional political and armed groups, mediators [only helped to legitimize and reinforce the Center](#), which is the cause of the crisis in the first place. International mediators prioritized mechanics of power-sharing and reconstruction of operational bodies rather than addressing institutions of security governance. Critically, most of the peace processes negated the goal of political transition by [not addressing the roots of the crisis](#) and not pressing for a rapid democratic transformation of the Center without which serious SSR could not be

contemplated or realized. Absent a transformation of the Sudanese state, it has become impossible to think of a political and security transition. Herein lies another impediment of the quest for restructuring and modernising Sudanese security sector which also convoluted any prospect for a serious reform.

We need to look back to the challenges and failures of the political transition, particularly regarding the representation of peripheral areas and marginalized groups. Such complexity defines the reality in Sudan. The effect of all the peace processes was to strengthen rather than put an end to the NCP's stranglehold on the state, deepen its economic power and maintain the networks of the Sudanese Islamic movement, increasing the paralysis of the Sudanese state. The analysis above, however, suggests that without marked structural changes in the relations of the Sudanese state with its peripheries, including significant moves towards a truly inclusive political process and containing the trend towards a fragmentation, any agreement reached is unlikely to produce a sustainable peace nor will it lead to reform or transformation of the security sector. Precisely the point at issue is despite the several cease-fires and mediation processes, DDR and SSR has never been a major component of peace agreements and when we look at the country's recent history, most of the SSR processes were either scarcely conceptualized or narrowly conceived. This continued to be the case even in both the Constitutional Charter and the [Juba Peace Agreement \(JPA\)](#), signed on October 3 2020 which defines security to include only those in uniform. The JPA was signed between three of the main rebel groups from the states of Darfur and Blue Nile. The focus has mainly been on the army and then rebel forces and most of the security arrangements were quickly rushed, never fully understood, or adopted by the relevant parties.

### **A Chronicle of Abortive DDRs**

Rather than having a broader understanding of the security sector and implementation regime, by for example bringing the judiciary and the police or by addressing important day-to-day security needs of the people, SSR in Sudan largely remained truncated at best and a slogan at worst. Besides, almost all peace processes except perhaps the [Comprehensive Peace Agreement/CPA/](#) with its own bumpy implementation, ended in having weak Demobilization, Demilitarization and Reintegration/DDR/components which only ensured a relapse to violence as the aftermath of the signing of the [Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement](#) and most importantly [Darfur Peace Agreement/DPA/](#) attests. Darfur rebels were not confident enough to lay down their arms and the Government of Sudan had then a staged disarmament of less than 200 people. Besides, the widespread view in Darfur was that the DPA did not adequately compensate them for their losses. The people of Darfur had seen no benefits from the DPA, indeed violence increased, and which further eroded their trust on the agreement. Crucial issues of security arrangements, in which DDR and SSR are critical, have not attracted much political will and policy attention, despite the well-founded perception that this impacts disproportionately upon the failure of peace processes. Thus, those that most negatively influence the outcome of peace processes are [left out of the equation](#); and these are by far the most determining factors in peace agreements. However, security transition requires time and confidence building. The politics needs to be ripe before you do

DDR, SSR and so on, as much as the success of these processes lies in confidence building and in generating enough *political calories* among actors. This reinforces the value of sequencing.

SSR programs must be longer in duration, more interactive in approach and less prescriptive in terms of expected outcomes and needs to be more carefully applied. All these are interconnected. This trust building could be done by providing security, some level of services delivery to the population or ensuring the safe return of IDPs. People need to see a minimum level of guarantees. For example, without any economic guarantee for former combatants to address their livelihood or without any political guarantee to address their security as well as that of local communities', you can't expect demobilisation. This was the challenge in the aftermath of the [Darfur Peace Agreement \(DPA\)](#) which was signed by [only two](#) of the four insurgent groups - not the main ones- making the future of the rebel fighters and the disarmament of the Janjaweed highly contentious. Not only the top brass, but also commanders and foot soldiers challenge or vie for positions in an integrated armed force. However, there are other important political considerations of which security transition mechanisms from DDR to SSR figure prominently. As it were, protagonists have differing, or even antagonistic focus and priorities as post-conflict security transition processes impacts on power relations as it is directed at the parties' capacities to employ force. Questions would eventually emerge on the pace of demobilization and the security guarantees when the forces are integrated, as well as over their respective positions and generally who would assume ultimate leadership of the newly 'consolidated military'.

For governments and international mediators, the purpose of post-agreement demobilization is to "voluntarily" remove from armed insurgents their capacity to engage in military actions, whilst the purpose of SSR is to engage in a process to build the state's legitimacy and effectiveness over its recently established (through DDR) monopoly on the use of force. In such a scenario the end set of any SSR programme is predetermined: it only seeks to support and legitimize the intended political consolidation and control of state power by one of the signatories, the governments in power. This reflects a general pattern of behavior of international engagements in peace processes in Africa and the propensity to invest diplomatic weight in the service of prevailing political (dis) order, often done intuitively, which only helps to [validate and reinforce](#) the bad guys at the Center, ultimately aggravating the crisis. This approach which could be described as 'structural stupidity' particularly guides Africa's regional organisations more than anybody else. One would not expect the AU or IGAD as they have been increasingly approaching paralysis to play a key role in DDR and SSR or political transitions, they are largely absent and increasingly reduced to mere spectators in the recent peace processes in Sudan. No wonder we have peace deals which remain *largely dead, partly alive* so much so that countries such as Sudan have essentially become 'dried up papers of peace agreements'. Here in lies the problem surrounding power consolidation by one of the actors in the conflict at the expense of others, enough driver for mutual suspicions which has been rife throughout among Sudanese rebel leaders. Besides, there has been widespread resistance, at least a great deal of suspicion, within the disparate rebel forces for DDR and integration. All these are interconnected.

It is no surprise that political actors and rebel leaders prioritized protection of their existing positions and share in government over the gradual working out of the details of security

sector integration, or for that matter democratic transition of Sudan and the needs of local people. The JPA and the integration of rebel combatants were part of Hemetti tactic to gain support and to balance the strength gained by civilian revolutionaries within the transitional government and within the army. Clearly, such powerful and wealthy individuals are expected to be politically ambitious and unlikely to negotiate in good faith or share power in a hurry. Most of the 'proxy talks' were mainly a tactical ploy as both had their own calculations of consolidating power at the expense of the other and the focus has always been on mere technicalities and timelines which also means they will continue to bluff external mediators that they would eventually integrate their forces (the storyline was that Al-Burhan wants to integrate RSF personnel into a professional army within two years and Dagalo [anticipates a longer process](#) that could take up to 10 years). These were at best diversionary. Integration of rival forces for political expediency, for example, is often problematic unless it is guided by a national strategy for building a genuinely professional security sector.

No wonder, control of the economy particularly military-run enterprises would become one of the most contentious point between the RSF and the SAF in 2023. And ultimately both actors with deeper economic and political interests were being asked to disarm and demobilize themselves, and this approach overlooks the fact that they were determined to hang on to power in an otherwise weak state. The war is primarily about the coercive control of Sudanese political economy between heads of two powerful security institutions battling one another for control of the state and its resources. The above analysis, however, suggests that the necessary 'security transition mechanisms' from ceasefire to DDR from DDR to SSR have never been attempted in a serious, coherent and efficient manner. Therefore, we can't even say there was a serious SSR process, or even programme, going on in Sudan before the war. External actors have never been supportive of SSR in Sudan. An overarching plan for SSR with a detailed implementation plan, from integration of forces to the demilitarization of politics and economics was missing. Control over smuggling trade, notably [gold mines](#) (facilitated by regional disrupters of state-led economic management) is deepening proxy wars, security sector fragmentation, and both the RSF and the army are heavily involved with other parts of the economy. And the extensive involvement of a militia force in national politics serving both political and commercial interests complicate things further. The precursor to this was when President Bashir brought the RSF to the capital city to act [as security protectors](#) against possible mutiny from traditional security institutions without any formal agreement on security sector integration nor a legal framework on how they should be accommodated. This development has reflected the first significant distortion of the security governance regime at the Center forcing other actors including leader of rebel forces to position themselves from a new standing.

Compounding this is the multiplicity of armed actors at different levels, loose command, and control structures, ethnic and regional rather than national loyalties, and ambiguity over who is a fighter. In countries like Sudan security integration and SSR need to consider issues surrounding devolution of power in any variant of a federal arrangement in which local actors agree on their preference for the structure of local security and justice provision in their localities. This means any arrangement at the national level need to be replicated and contextualised at all levels, something yet to be done. The details of SSR in Sudan can be confounding that extends beyond a mere competition between rival generals. Related

consideration is the impact of legacies of war and militarization on DDR and SSR, a least interrogated phenomenon. As indicated earlier the case of Sudan (including South Sudan) attests to the fact that militarization and arming different militia groups in warfare continues even after a peace agreement. But increasingly, the new trend in the region particularly Sudan is that these militias, who have long served as key instrument of war of the state are now rebelling against the state, creating a uniquely higher challenge to political transition and peace in Sudan. The use of paramilitary militias beyond waging war against marginalized communities or as a counterweight to formal armed forces if the latter are perceived as a potential threat as happened in the last years of Bashir's rule is contributing to the progressive break-up of the security sector. And this is being felt around the region. This process which I came to describe as *militiafication* to explain the process of government sponsored militias turning against their benefactors and use violence to achieve political and economic agendas. The phenomenon is not unique to Sudan (though a prime example) as similar developments can unfortunately be seen in varying degrees in neighbouring countries (including a contagion effect on the broader Sahel) such as South Sudan and notably Ethiopia when Amhara militias, commonly referred to as *Fano*, supported by the regime to fight the war on Tigray eventually rebelled against the regime in late 2022, needless to say this is contextually -both politically and geographically-determined.

The difference is that in the South Sudan or Ethiopian case government sub-contracted militias were not promoted to engage in foreign financed security operations and most importantly not parachuted to the capital like the RSF, hence not an immediate cause for disruption of security forces at the Center nor a direct threat to power. Guided by the short-term imperative of staying in power through societal militarization and dispersal of violence leaders in the region are too often short-sighted and transactional. However, the similarity is very striking that in the Sudan and Ethiopian cases these insurgent paramilitaries were not only instrumental in mere government-sponsored wars rather they are globally notorious for their human rights abuses and are implicated in mass atrocities and genocide, as demonstrated by the *Janjaweed* in [Western Sudan](#) and *Fano* in [Western Tigray](#). Thus, we are not talking about the usual type of relatively regulated 'subordinate' militias forces. The combined impact of the ferocity of these groups, state-led violence and counter-insurgency operations and the involvement of opportunistic regional actors have fostered high levels of violence and fragmentation of the security sector. The broader point is the increasing pattern towards the *deinstitutionalization* of the state in all its forms: security, economic and foreign relations. The main causality is however peace and political transition (in which SSR figures prominently) and Sudanese actors are not solely to be blamed for this.

### **The New Geopolitical Twist: Old and New Powers in Sudan**

Already the political transition in Sudan was meant to be negatively influenced by Gulf and Middle Eastern powers who had no interest-or even a distaste-for SSR and democratic dispensation. Thus, political considerations are very much a factor which I argued in most of my writings over the years one of these is the chapter on "Making Sense of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Deal"- and it is less surprising that beyond lowering the threat from Islamists their involvement was mainly aimed at suppressing civilian pro-democracy movements in countries like Sudan. The money given by the Gulf countries to Sudan during the initial months of the

transition, which came to be led by a Sovereign Council dominated by the Military and RSF, to prevent a complete economic breakdown is unrivalled, and no one knows the type of conditionalities they attached to that money. So, if the countries which have been the ones supporting the RSF, especially the UAE, have become the patrons of the Sudanese state, how could we be amazed that SSR or democratic transition hasn't gained any traction during the "transition"? For their part, leaders of key countries in the Horn have been beset by multiple crisis, bracing for a policy of unprincipled engagement with emerging powers, changing the dynamics of external intervention in the Horn of Africa. Perhaps exhausted and too eager for mere survival the regimes in Khartoum and Addis abandoned their self-determining posture on foreign and regional security policy, an extraordinary development in Horn of African international system which will not be discussed here in detail. This made it far easier for Gulf powers to cultivate client states and non-state actors that will do their bidding.

The RSF came to play a security role in the capital, ensure economic control over most of the smuggling trade and migration routes and act as a mercenary force, among others, in the [Saudi-led war in Yemen](#). The importance of these dynamics cannot be overstated as the RSF managed to expand its role in domestic and external military missions and advance an autonomous posture and influence on the conduct of Sudanese foreign policy. Quite pernicious is however the role of the West particularly the European Union which financially supported a militia to emerge as a strong player in Sudan killing democracy or security transition. I have been maintaining, certainly with a forgivable degree of exaggeration, that the European Union created the RSF. Since 2016 European security policy has been turning callous ultimately compromising its previously widely held norms and principles. In May 2015 as part of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) the EU's Foreign Affairs Council encouraged the High Representative and the Commission to develop, in consultation with the Member States/MS/, an EU-wide strategic framework for Security Sector Reform by mid-2016. It was during the MS meetings (I happen to attend in two of the proceedings) that issues of Train and Equip/T&E/ emerged as a preferred tool of some European countries leading to an EU's action plan which focused on capacity development of Africa's security forces. This came to immediately involve [building the capacities of Sudan's security](#) and law enforcement agencies, including a paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which has been considered as key to fend off migrants at the borders of Sudan from reaching Europe.

This process dates back to the launching of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF for Africa) in 2014. Dubbed as the "[Khartoum Process](#)" the initiative considered Sudan as one of the major transit country for migrants from neighbouring countries and its security agencies were deemed key recipient of aid. Train and equip has a close affinity with the militaristic Train-and-Equip mentality of the Cold War. During the Cold War these programmes almost always took the form of training and supply of equipment designed to enhance the operational capacity of security bodies with no concern for democratic governance or rule of law. But the programme in Sudan fundamentally differs from the Cold War period aimed at training and equipping the armed forces: it trained and built the capacity of militias implicated in mass atrocities. By doing so it contributed to the rise to power of a paramilitary force, pushing Sudan to the doorsteps of becoming a militia state. It also led to the fragmentation of the security and political order, stimulating the competition for power and hegemony between different elite groups as they attempt to capture the newly trained and equipped

security institutions. Although the democratization of politics and governance of security has never been supported by the warring parties, the crisis of security transition in Sudan is part of a complex regional and international political game. External actors particularly the European Union and Gulf powers played a critical role in thwarting SSR and democratic political transition in Sudan.