GEOPOLITICAL FUTURES

Special Collection

Middle East

Part 4 **The Nile Valley**

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0 | INTRODUCTION

The Middle East and North Africa is a troubled region, and it isn't easy to find a success story to write about or a rewarding political experience to report. This complete work consists of several dozen essays spread out over 8 parts tackling the region's conflicts and historical evolution, relating them to contemporary issues. Each piece includes the publication date to link certain events to a specific period. It specifically questions and analyzes the political, economic, and interstate issues that beset the region without resolving them, either at the domestic or collective level.

This fourth installment of essays in the collection focuses on the national and regional power dynamics in the Nile Valley. This valley regularly experiences conflict and high level of ten-sions among neighbors, in large part due to the competition for scarce fresh water supplies and maritime sea access. Egypt stands as the pivotal country in this regional dynamic. As a result several essays are dedicated to the country's water supply, domestic political situation and regional relationships. The remainder look at Sudan, a hotbed of conflict that permeates regional stability and draws in other Middle Eastern powers and conflicts from the other side of the Red Sea.

1 | Egypt's Water Security Problem

The country sees Ethiopia's construction of a hydroelectric dam as a threat to its water supply.

March 18, 2020 | Hilal Khashan

The ancient Greek historian Herodotus described Egypt as the gift of the Nile River, because without the Nile, Egypt wouldn't exist. But this lifeline, which supplies nearly 99 percent of Egypt's water needs, is facing a threat the government believes could be disastrous for the country's population. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which is scheduled for completion in 2023, will be the largest hydroelectric dam in Africa and capable of generating roughly 15 gigawatts of energy. But for years, the project has been a major source of friction between Ethiopia and Egypt; Ethiopia even refused to attend talks in late February in Washington to resolve the dispute. Nine years into the dam's construction, it seems Egypt's options for blocking the project are shrinking.

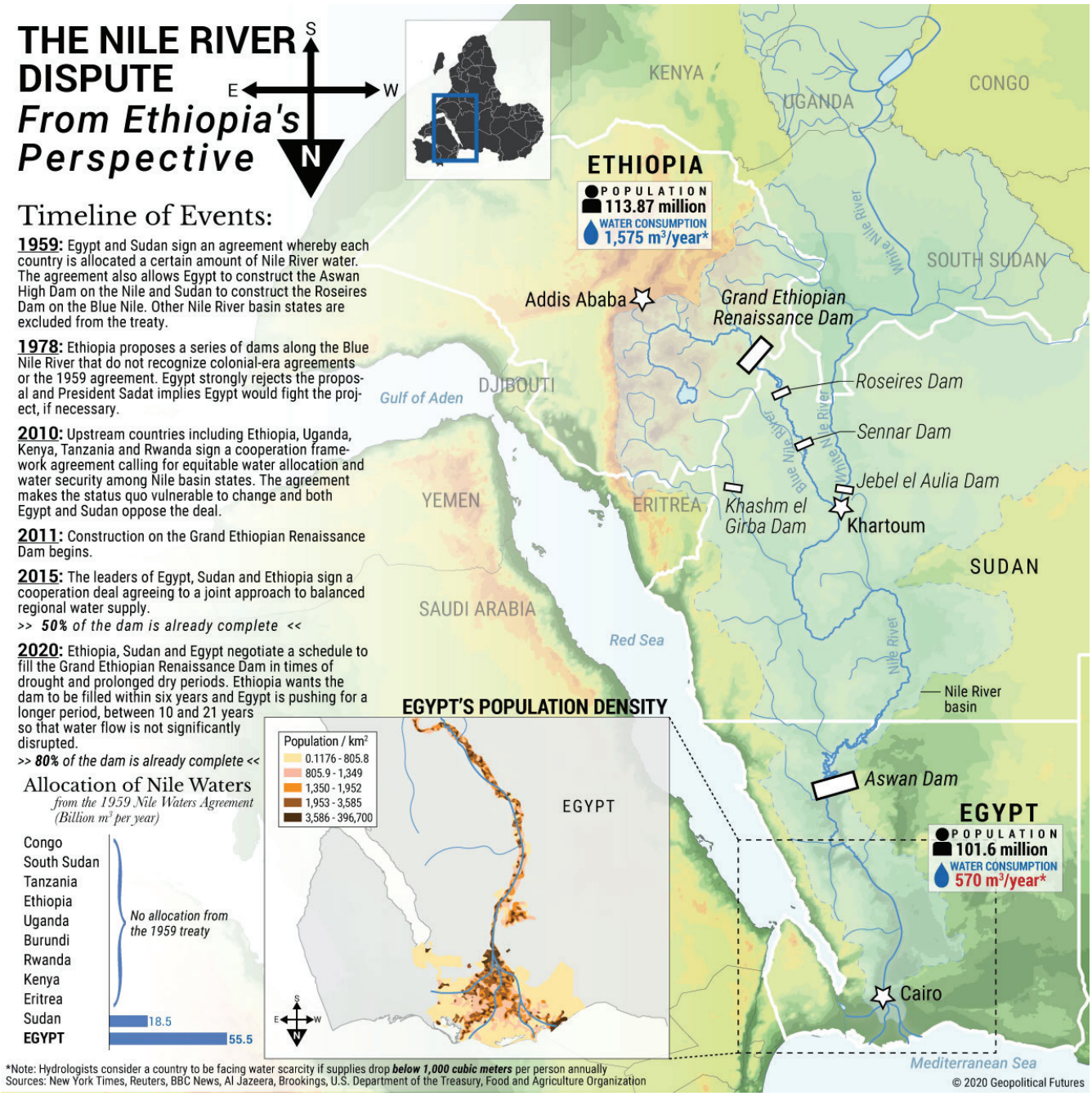
The Making of the Standoff

In 1929, the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty regulating use of the Nile River waters granted Egypt a yearly water allocation of 48 billion cubic meters and Sudan 4 bcm out of an estimated annual yield of 84 bcm. The treaty entitled Egypt to veto any attempt by an upstream riparian state (especially Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania) to construct dams along the river. In 1959, Egypt and Sudan signed an updated agreement that increased their water allocation to 55.5 bcm and 18.5 bcm, respectively.

Since it did not participate in the negotiations, Ethiopia has refused to recognize the two agreements, dismissing them as vestiges of colonialism. It argues that Egypt has no right to claim the lion's share of the Nile's water and disrupt Ethiopia's own development plans, including construction of the GERD, which lies on the Blue Nile, a river that originates at Ethiopia's Lake Tana. Ethiopia wants to fill the GERD reservoir, which has a total capacity of 74 bcm, within three years, but Egypt has proposed a seven-year filling period. Egypt also tried (unsuccessfully) to convince Ethiopia to reduce the reservoir's capacity from 74 bcm to 14.5 bcm and the dam's height from 145 meters to 90 meters.

Another subject of the dispute is water allocation. Egypt wants to be guaranteed 40 bcm of water annually, but Ethiopia is offering only 31 bcm. The U.S. has proposed that Egypt be granted 37 bcm, and it's likely that, in a compromise deal, Egypt would be allocated 35 bcm. (Egypt, after all, never endorsed the 2010 Cooperative Framework Agreement, which was signed by Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya and Burundi and which promotes equitable allocation of Nile River waters, because it would require Egypt to reduce its share of the water supply.) Another factor complicating talks is Egypt's unwillingness to compromise on its demand that the water level at the Aswan High Dam stay 165 meters above sea level.

It's easy to see, however, why Egypt is so protective over the Nile. Egypt is an arid desert,



and 95 percent of its population lives along the banks of the Nile and its delta. For Egyptians, access to the river is a matter of life and death, and the thought of going to war to secure the flow of its water runs deep in their collective consciousness. Upon completion, the GERD will cut Egypt's agricultural production by 50 percent, devastating water-intensive crops such as rice, potatoes and cotton. The GERD will also reduce Egypt's hydraulic electrical supply by one-third, valued at $300 million, thereby increasing overhead costs for industry. More than 5 million farmers will lose their jobs. They will likely relocate to densely populated urban centers, overburdening these cities' failing infrastructure, exacerbating the country's social insecurity, and creating a fertile breeding ground for Islamic militant groups.

Public Perspectives in Egypt and Ethiopia

Egypt's minister of irrigation recently criticized Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed for reneging on his public oath not to compromise Egypt's water security, but there's little sympathy in Ethiopia for Egypt's cause. Ethiopians generally view Egypt as a colonial power and blame it for the high rate of poverty in Ethiopia. They accuse Egypt, whether correctly or not, of racism against Africa's black populations and of taking part in the slave trade, particularly during the 19th century.

In his bid to seize the Blue Nile, Egypt's Khedive Ismail sent his European and confederate-led army to Ethiopia. Egyptian troops took Massawa, a port city in present-day Eritrea, which precipitated the Ethiopian-Egyptian War of 1874-76. Egypt suffered a crushing defeat in the battles of Gura and Gundet, losing thousands of troops and an entire arsenal of rifles and cannons. The conflict was one of the factors that led to Egypt's bankruptcy under Ismail.

One of the war's lasting consequences is the lingering perception in Ethiopia of Egyptians as invaders. Their frequent threats to go to war over the Nile has sparked anger among many Ethiopians. Former Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi publicly threatened to declare war on Ethiopia, and his predecessor, Hosni Mubarak, said he would have used Tu-160 bombers to stop Ethiopia from building the GERD if construction had begun during his time in office – even though Egypt did not even possess the Tu-160 at the time. Some have even claimed that President Anwar Sadat ordered airstrikes in the 1970s against Ethiopia to block it from building a dam on the river.

Egypt's Options

But what can Egypt really do to stop the GERD's construction? Egyptians have learned the lessons of their failed invasion of Ethiopia in 1874; they, and the Egyptian military, are not eager to go to war against Ethiopia again. Egyptian rulers and military commanders have also learned from Egypt's involvement in the unwinnable war in Yemen from 1962 to 67 and Gamal Abdel Nasser's bluff in 1967 that led to a disastrous war with Israel. Egyptian officials understand, therefore, that a failed military campaign against the GERD would have devastating consequences. Moreover, President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi wants to keep his grip on power and has no interest in initiating a foreign military intervention. In addition, the armed forces, which were focused on business and dominated more than half of the country's economy during Mubarak's administration, are ill-prepared for an armed conflict. Many army units are preoccupied with operating factories or involved in construction projects, and Egyptian military officers want to avoid any actions that might jeopardize their elevated socioeconomic status.

So, when el-Sissi met with the Egyptian command's top brass, instructed them to prepare for the possibility of action and dispatched military and intelligence envoys to Khartoum, Juba and Addis Ababa, after Ethiopia boycotted the talks in Washington, it was clear that a full-blown war was extremely unlikely. Subtle threats to launch an airstrike against the GERD do not intimidate Addis Ababa because it knows such an attack is exceedingly unlikely for at least three reasons. First, the dam site is well-defended. Second, U.S. mediation is still ongoing despite

the failure of the talks in Washington. Third, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which have close ties with Egypt, have significant economic interests in Ethiopia and would not approve of a strike against the country.

What's more, Egyptian Rafale and F-16 Block 52 fighters lack the range to reach the GERD since the Egyptian air force does not have air refueling capability. Even if they reach the dam, it's unclear if Egyptian pilots have the skill needed to negotiate the elaborate missile defense systems that protect the construction site, let alone destroy its thick concrete walls. Egypt has a large and well-armed standing army and a modern navy that includes two Mistral Helicopter warships and fours Gowind-class corvettes, but they are ill-suited to attack the GERD.

For Egypt, diplomacy is the only option available, even though its bargaining power is limited. The GERD's construction is approaching completion, and Abiy has the support of the upstream riparian states, as well as Sudan, which opposed the Arab League's draft resolution supporting Egypt in its current dispute with Ethiopia. Egypt cannot count on the support of the U.S., which has cautiously stressed the need for mutual respect among the Nile Valley states. The only real course of action for Egypt is to conserve water as much as possible, invest in water desalination plants, and normalize its relations with all countries in the Middle East because it needs all the foreign assistance it can get.

2 | Egypt as a Declining Regional Power

Cairo's main focus is maintaining stability at home rather than projecting power abroad.

June 10, 2021 | Hilal Khashan

In June 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama delivered an address to the Muslim world proposing a new start in Arab-U.S. relations. He chose to deliver his potentially trailblazing speech at Cairo University in Egypt as a recognition of the country's historic role in the Muslim world. (Subsequent developments, including the Arab uprisings and the rise of the Islamic State, dashed hopes for a shift on both sides.)

However, Egypt's prominence as a regional leader has been declining for years. Beginning in the early 1970s during Anwar Sadat's presidency, the country became increasingly inward-focused. It prioritized combating political opposition and Islamist militancy at home rather than projecting power abroad. Since Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi's 2013 coup, which overthrew Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated President Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's foreign policy has been a reflection of its internal affairs. Countries that support the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Turkey and Qatar, are considered ideological adversaries, while those that oppose political Islam, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are seen as tactical allies.

From Pan-Arabism to Egypt First

Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882 cut off Egypt from its traditional foreign policy theaters, especially in West Asia. Under British occupation, Egyptian nationalism developed differently from the nationalist movements in West Asia and North Africa. Most Egyptian heads of state did not try to project power beyond Egypt's borders, though there were two notable exceptions: King Farouk and President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Farouk was a descendant of Muhammad Ali, who seized power in Egypt in 1805 and aspired to create an Arab kingdom. Farouk decided to lead Egypt into the 1948 Arab-Israeli war against the wishes of his own government and army command. In 1950, he closed the Tiran Passes to Israeli shipping, and the following year, he played an instrumental role in drafting the Joint Arab Defense Treaty to confront Israel.

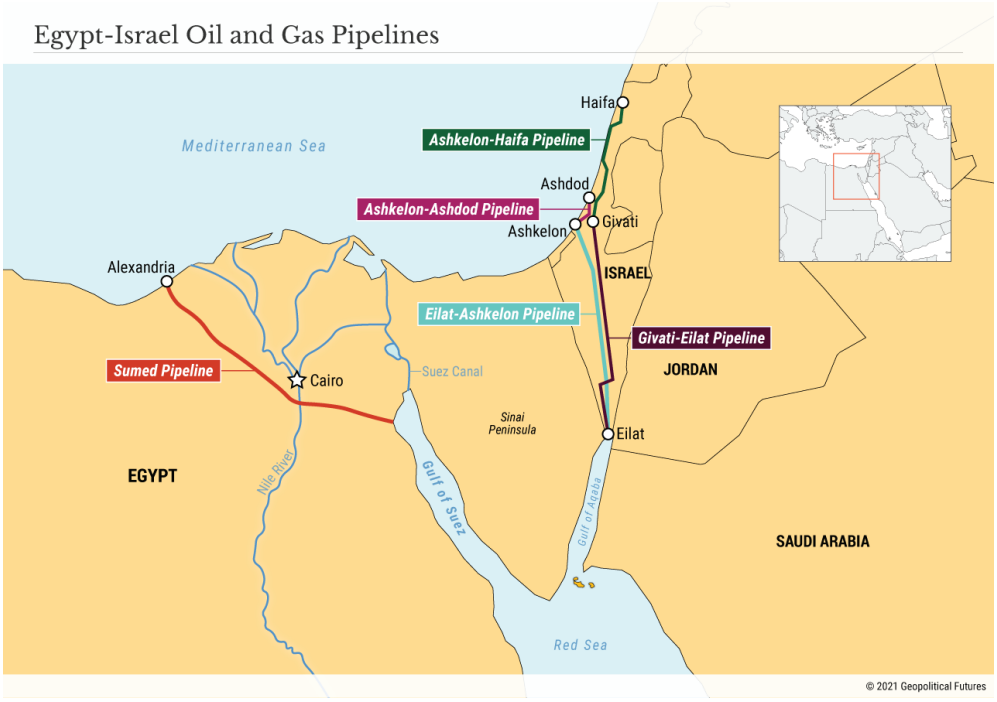
Nasser, meanwhile, had distinct Arab roots, unlike most Egyptians, and hailed from the Asyut governorate in Upper Egypt. He militarily and economically supported the Algerian war of independence in 1954-62. In 1957, he sent troops to Syria to defend the country against a possible Turkish invasion. In 1960, he dispatched army units to Kuwait after Iraqi President Abdul Karim Qasim threatened to occupy it. Two years later, he sent one-third of the Egyptian army to Yemen to defend the fledgling republican regime after a coup overthrew its king. Even after Egypt's staggering defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War, Nasser remained a powerful figure in the Arab world. Though many Arab leaders viewed him as an enemy, the vast majority of the Arab public saw him as the uncontested champion of Arab nationalism.

Since Nasser's death in 1970, however, Egypt's regional ambitions have been limited. Egyptian presidents have recognized that the poor state of the country's economy disqualified it from playing a leading role in regional politics. Anwar Sadat, who succeeded Nasser, opposed sending a single Egyptian soldier to fight on behalf of Arabs. During his presidency, he was boycotted by most Arab leaders because he made unilateral peace with Israel. Hosni Mubarak, who became president in 1981 after Sadat's assassination, sent Egyptian troops to Saudi Arabia in 1990 as part of the U.S. coalition to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. But his move was not motivated by a desire for Egypt to become a regional power but by a desire to stop Iraq from becoming one.

El-Sissi's Politics of Regime Survival

Current President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi has mostly followed suit. Since becoming president, he has been preoccupied with internal security matters. As the only Egyptian president to stage a coup to seize power since 1952, his top concern has been staying in control, not reestablishing Egypt's leadership of the Arab world. His focus has been on safeguarding Egypt's borders from incoming militants and arms, which could be used to support Egypt's homegrown militant movements.

El-Sissi has no regional power ambitions. However, he doesn't want the aggressive foreign policies of the Saudi and Emirati crown princes to overshadow Egypt's historical role in the region. He has deep concerns about the Gulf countries' peace deals with Israel, which threaten to limit the need for Egypt's regional mediation. Cairo gained its reputation as a regional peace broker after the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference. But since then, the Palestinians have turned to Turkey to facilitate a reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, while Hamas has sought Qatar's help to ease Israel's blockade on Gaza. Egypt is also increasingly economically alienated. Last October, Israel Pipeline Company signed a deal with the UAE to transport oil from Abu Dhabi to Europe via the Eilat-Ashkelon Pipeline. The agreement effectively reduces oil shipments via the Suez Canal by 17 percent and compromises Egypt's Sumed oil pipeline from the Gulf of Suez to Alexandria.



Egypt adopted a relatively proactive and pro-Palestinian approach to Israel's recent operation in Gaza. (By comparison, it was relatively passive during similar bouts of violence in 2009 and 2014.) In 2014, Egypt pressured Hamas to accept Israel's terms for a ceasefire, but this time around, it brokered a deal that took ef-

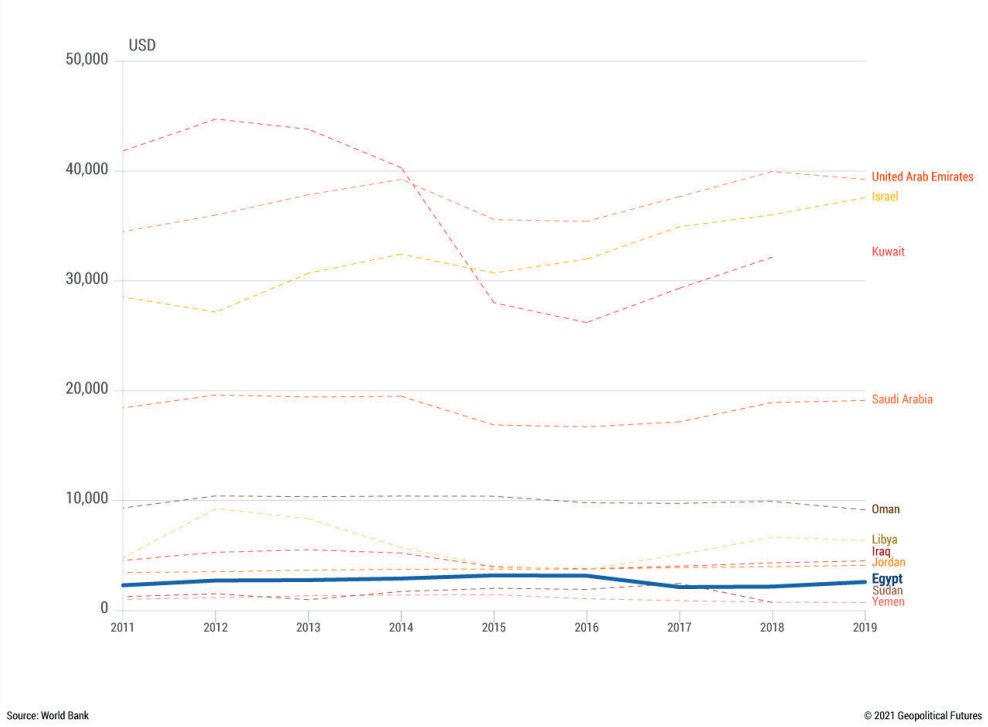
fect without any preconditions. It painted Israel as the aggressor in the conflict, and a prominent Egyptian Islamic scholar called on Muslims to seize Jerusalem and halt Israel's West Bank settlements.

Still, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu thanked el-Sissi for facilitating the cease-fire. As for Hamas, it was skeptical of Egypt's offer of $500 million for Gaza's reconstruction, knowing that Egyptian companies run by the armed forces would lead the reconstruction efforts and that these efforts would increase Egypt's influence over Gaza.

Egypt's government-controlled media referred to Cairo's efforts to negotiate a cease-fire deal as the dawning of a golden era in Egyptian foreign policy. The media lauded Egyptian officials' negotiation skills, ignoring the fact that Biden played the decisive role in stopping the fighting. The claim that Egypt was restoring its relevance as an international peace broker rings hollow because in Egypt, Gaza is often considered more of a domestic matter rather than a regional one. (Cairo occupied the Gaza Strip from 1948 until 1967.) In any event, successful mediation does not make a country a regional power.

Egyptian media have exaggerated el-Sissi's achievements. They claimed that his forceful diplomacy protected the Palestinians against Israeli aggression. It also spread propaganda about his military coup, claiming it was a popular revolution that saved Egypt from the Muslim Brotherhood. The media also glorified Egypt's massive troop mobilization in the northwest – which it claimed resolved the Libyan crisis to Egypt's advantage.

Adjusted Net National Income Per Capita, *2011 - 2019*



Source: World Bank

Egypt has myriad other problems with which to contend. It has a weak economy, heavy debt, poor educational system and high unemployment. According to the World Bank, Egypt's per capita income in 2019 was $3,000 compared to $8,000 for the Middle East and North Africa region. Although real incomes saw modest growth over the past few years, they are not sustainable in the long term because Egypt's economic reforms are superficial. The Egyptian economy relies heavily on the public sector, led by the armed forces. The International Monetary

Fund strongly recommended that the government promote the private sector, but instead, it increased the military's involvement in the economy.

The 1952 military coup ended a century of capitalistic development. Nasser's nationalization of the economy had devastating consequences for Egypt's economic growth. When Sadat made peace with Israel, he slashed the military budget but allowed the armed forces to play an active role in the economy to generate revenue. Under Mubarak, the military effectively dominated the economy, a trend that only grew under el-Sissi, who's dependent on the loyalty of senior army officers who oppose any attempts at privatization.

Egypt is also facing a low-intensity insurgency in northern Sinai and an intensifying water dispute with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. (The project, which is still under construction, has already decreased Egypt's production of staple crops – wheat, rice, and sugar – by more than 25 percent.) El-Sissi believes Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is seeking to transform his country into an economic hub and marginalize Egypt's role in the region.

A country with an economy controlled by its military and facing an existential threat to its water supply can hardly expect to become a regional power. El-Sissi has shifted Egypt's focus from the Middle East to Africa, in part because of the dispute over the dam, but he remains too preoccupied with the existential threat from the south to worry about restoring Egypt's regional power status.

Egypt enjoys geostrategic advantages that qualify it to play a leading regional role. It straddles Africa, Asia and Europe and controls one of the world's most important maritime routes. It is the Arab world's most populous country and has its most homogeneous population. However, Egypt remains inwardly focused, and its people have little interest in non-Egyptian affairs. Considering the state of the country's economy, it's unlikely these conditions will change any time soon.

3| Egyptian-Sudanese Relations: A Legacy of Distrust

Sudan hasn't forgotten the decades it spent under Egyptian rule.

April 29, 2021 | Hilal Khashan

Modern-day Sudan began to take shape with Egypt's invasion in the early 19th century. That event led to decades of Egyptian rule, which left an indelible scar on relations between the two countries that lasts to this day. Egyptian officials often describe relations between the pair as friendly, stressing that they share a sense of unity as downstream countries on the Nile River. But more often than not, their interactions are fraught with suspicion and distrust emanating from an uneven relationship between two North African neighbors.

Colonial Past

Tensions between the two countries go back to Egypt's conquest of Sudan. In 1821, invading Egyptian troops made Khartoum their headquarters and, 13 years later, also conquered Darfur. In 1881, the Mahdist religious reform movement appeared in Sudan and quickly put an end to the unpopular Turco-Egyptian rule of the country. A year later, the British invaded Egypt, and together they conquered the Mahdists in Sudan in 1899. They established joint Anglo-Egyptian rule over the country, which lasted until 1956.

At that time, the British informed Egypt that the Sudanese people would be given the right to self-determination. But Mohammed Naguib, who became Egyptian president in 1953, wanted to reunite the two countries after Britain's departure from Sudan. Being half Sudanese himself, Naguib was a trusted negotiator and succeeded in forming a broad coalition of Sudanese politicians in favor of developing stronger ties to Egypt, including the possibility of post-independence unification. But his humiliating ouster by Premier Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1954 shocked the Sudanese and discouraged them from negotiating their post-independence relationship. The revelation that Egypt was involved in the 1955 Torit Mutiny by southern Sudanese troops further dampened prospects for unification and created a lasting distrust of Egypt in Sudan.

Ebb and Flow

The ebb and flow of relations between them continued after Sudan's independence. Egypt has been more inclined to work with military regimes in Sudan because democratic governments are less pliable. For example, the Sudanese parliament voted in 1958 to abolish the 1929 Nile Water Agreement, which gave Egypt the right to 48 billion cubic meters of water per year compared to Sudan's 4 billion cubic meters. But Sudanese Gen. Ibrahim Abboud, who rose to power after a 1958 military coup, signed a water-sharing agreement with Egypt in 1959 without involving the other riparian states. He also agreed to cooperate in the construction of Lake Nasser, a reservoir for the Aswan High Dam, which led to the flooding of the city of Wadi Halfa near the Egyptian border, displacing thousands of Nubians on both sides of the border and blocking trade. Nasser said Egypt would supply Sudan with electricity from the dam but later reneged on his promise. The Sudanese people never forgave Abboud for capitulating to

Nasser and staged an uprising that led to his ouster five years later.

In 1969, another military coup in Sudan overthrew the government of the nationalist Umma Party and brought to power Jaafar Numayri. He immediately established close ties with Nasser and with his successor, Anwar Sadat, a year later. But in 1985, Numayri was himself overthrown, leading to the reestablishment of civilian rule. Just four years later, however, Omar al-Bashir staged a military coup and became president. Relations between Egypt and Sudan initially improved but quickly worsened after al-Bashir struck an alliance with the National Islamic Front, which wanted Sudan to emulate Iran's Islamic revolution.

In 2019, the Sudanese army ousted al-Bashir after an eight-month popular uprising that demanded political reform and democratic rule. The new Sudanese leadership embarked on a campaign to distance the country from its Arab identity and immerse it in African affairs. In 2020, it normalized relations with Israel. It also shifted its stance on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

For years, Sudan supported the project, arguing it would help regulate the flow of water and provide Sudan with cheap electricity. The transitional government sided with Ethiopia and refused to sign the U.S.-brokered Declaration of Principles, which was meant to help resolve the dispute over water rights. It also declined to endorse the Arab League's demand that Ethiopia respect Egypt's historical rights to the Nile River. But late last year, the head of Sudan's ruling council, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, changed his position. A power struggle between al-Burhan and Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok swayed the former to accept the Egyptian position on the issue, likely believing that he needed Cairo's support to prevail over Hamdok. The Sudanese government supported al-Burhan's stance, demanding a binding agreement that outlines water shares for each riparian country in order to resolve the dispute over the GERD. In addition to siding with Egypt, he took advantage of Ethiopia's war in Tigray by sending Sudanese troops to seize a disputed area known as al-Fashaga. He also invited Egypt to participate in air exercises in northern Sudan, sending Ethiopia a powerful message that the two countries would unite if Addis Ababa continued to ignore their Nile water demands.

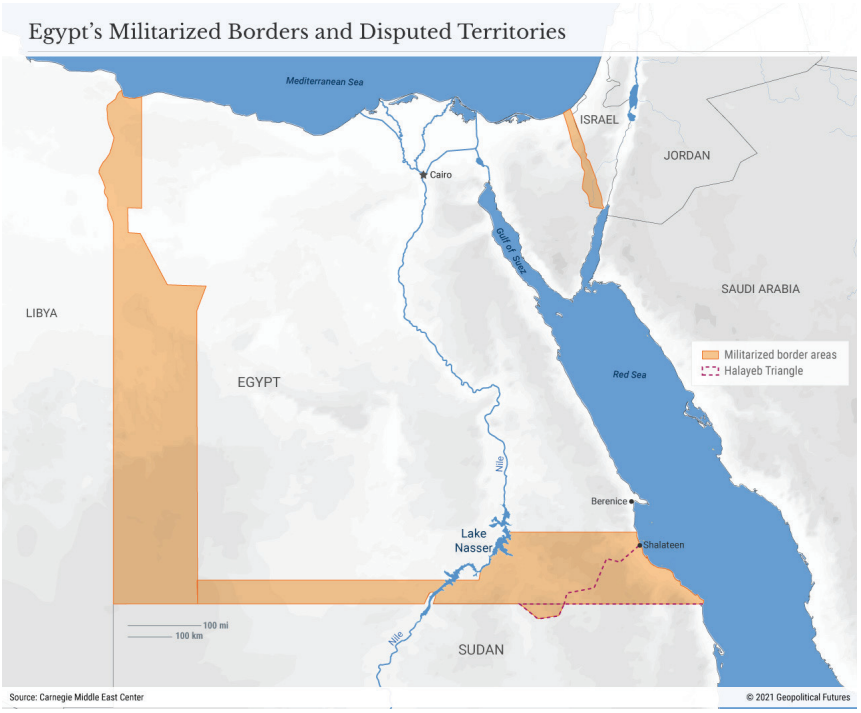
Sudan's grievances also stem from allegations of poor treatment of Sudanese people in Egypt. Some 2 million to 5 million Sudanese live in Egypt, permanently or temporarily – a significant number considering travel restrictions imposed in Egypt after the 1952 coup. Egypt is a favorite destination for many Sudanese people looking for medical treatment or employment, or as a transit stop on their way to seeking asylum elsewhere. However, many Sudanese in Egypt say they have been marginalized and forced to accept poor living standards. Cairo has yet to implement the 2004 Four Freedoms Agreement – which covers freedom of movement, work, residence and property ownership – because of security concerns.

In 2005, Egyptian security forces killed 20 Sudanese people who took part in a sit-in outside the Cairo office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to protest their dismal living conditions and demand resettlement in a third country. In 2015, the Egyptian army killed six Sudanese trying to cross into Israel from Sinai. The incident came just one week after 15 Africans, most from Sudan, were found dead in the border area south of the Egyptian city of Rafah. Egypt's foreign minister then reiterated his country's commitment to strengthening relations with Khartoum and ensuring the safety and well-being of Sudanese visitors and residents.

Unstable Relations

Egyptian-Sudanese relations worsened after Anwar Sadat was assassinated in 1981 and Hosni Mubarak became Egypt's new president. In 1984, Mubarak deployed Egyptian troops to the mineral-rich Halayeb Triangle, a disputed region on the border between the two countries, and evicted Sudanese troops from the area. Sudan's loss of the oil-rich south pushed it to reclaim Halayeb, but Egypt refused to give up the territory and established the Shalateen Mining Co. in the region in 2012 to seal its fate.

Egypt opposed the 2002 Machakos Protocol, which recognized South Sudan's right to self-determination, fearing it would compromise Egypt's position on the Nile. And even when Khartoum's transitional government sided with Egypt, Cairo had doubts about its true intentions. That's in part because al-Bashir had sided with Ethiopia on the GERD for years, not because of technical considerations or Sudan's geostrategic interests but because Addis Ababa opposed turning al-Bashir in to the International Criminal Court for his role in the Darfur genocide. Cairo also took issue with the smuggling of arms to Libya's Tripoli-based Gov-



ernment of National Accord and insurgents in Sinai. Arms smuggling and their competing claims over the Halayeb Triangle drove the security-focused Egyptian government to create a buffer zone along the Sudanese border that ranges in width from 25 to 110 kilometers. Last year, Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi inaugurated the Bernice military complex on the Red Sea, a project that many Sudanese see as a threat. The 150,000-acre complex includes an air base, a naval base, special combat units and training grounds.

The Sudanese public wants the political leadership in Khartoum to distance itself from Cairo. On the GERD, they see themselves as caught in a conflict between Ethiopia and Egypt that can be resolved amicably with Addis Ababa. They also view their northern neighbor as an overbearing adversary that has meddled in their domestic affairs in the past. (Egypt, for example, supplied rebels in Darfur with arms for years.) Egypt's political leadership has avoided burning bridges with Sudan entirely, leaving the door open for future cooperation. But the uneven relationship between the two countries has alienated the Sudanese and established a lingering legacy of distrust.

4 | Why Egyptians Don't Dissent

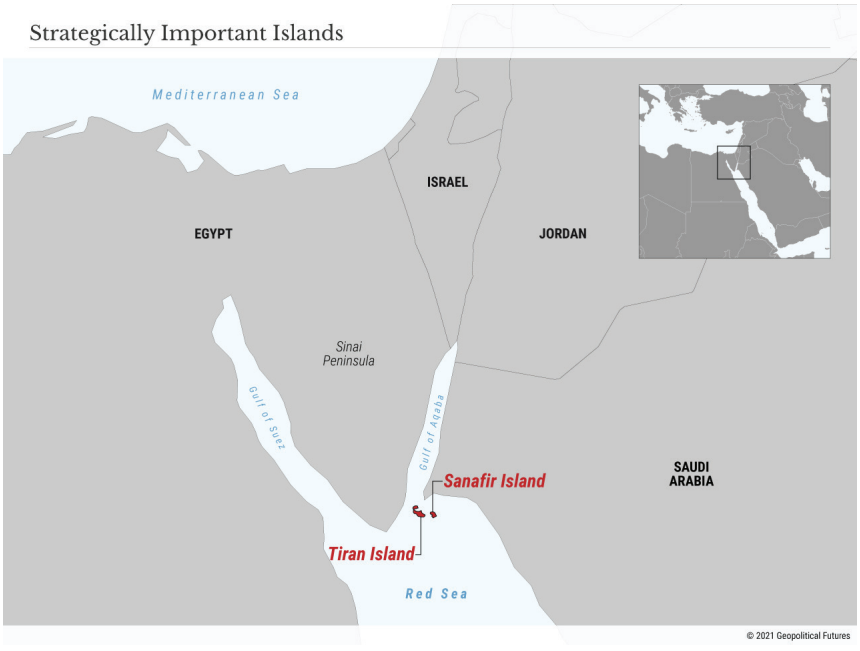
Public criticism of the government is rare and can even be dangerous.

July 29, 2021 | Hilal Khashan

Earlier this month, Abdel Nasser Salamah, the former editor-in-chief of Cairo's renowned al-Ahram newspaper, was arrested for posting an open letter on Facebook urging President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi to resign and face charges for relinquishing Egypt's rights to the Nile River. The case is an apt example of why dissent in Egypt has become so rare and can even be dangerous. What would be regarded in a democratic country as an expression of opinion, in Egypt leads to arrest, torture and a heavy prison sentence.

Suppressing Freedom of Expression

Salamah's criticism of el-Sissi stemmed from what Salamah saw as the government's weak response to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), a massive project that threatens to decrease the flow of water downstream through the Nile River. Salamah also questioned el-Sissi's expenditure of billions of dollars on arms despite the government's refusing to resort to military action to settle the dam dispute. Salamah also chastised el-Sissi for handing two small islands in the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia. But in Egypt, this level of criticism directed at the president is extremely rare. Salamah was accused of spreading fake news and being a member of a terrorist organization. Lawyers for the government referred to him as a traitor and accused him of misrepresenting Egypt's GERD policy for the sole aim of spreading anarchy and unrest in the country.



Many Egyptians share Salamah's opinions on the water issue. He argued that el-Sissi should not have signed the 2015 Nile Agreement, which absolved Ethiopia from respecting Egypt's water claims. A member of Egypt's Supreme Council for Media Regulation slammed Salamah's post, calling it slanderous, while pro-government media outlets described Salamah as an instigator.

Such accusations against dissenters have become all too common. Four months before Salamah's arrest, a human rights advocate was also detained on charges of dis-

seminating fake news and joining a terrorist group. She was handed an 18-month prison term for daring to disclose Egypt's poor health conditions and a COVID-19 outbreak among prison inmates. Such charges have become standard justification for jailing political activists and human rights advocates.

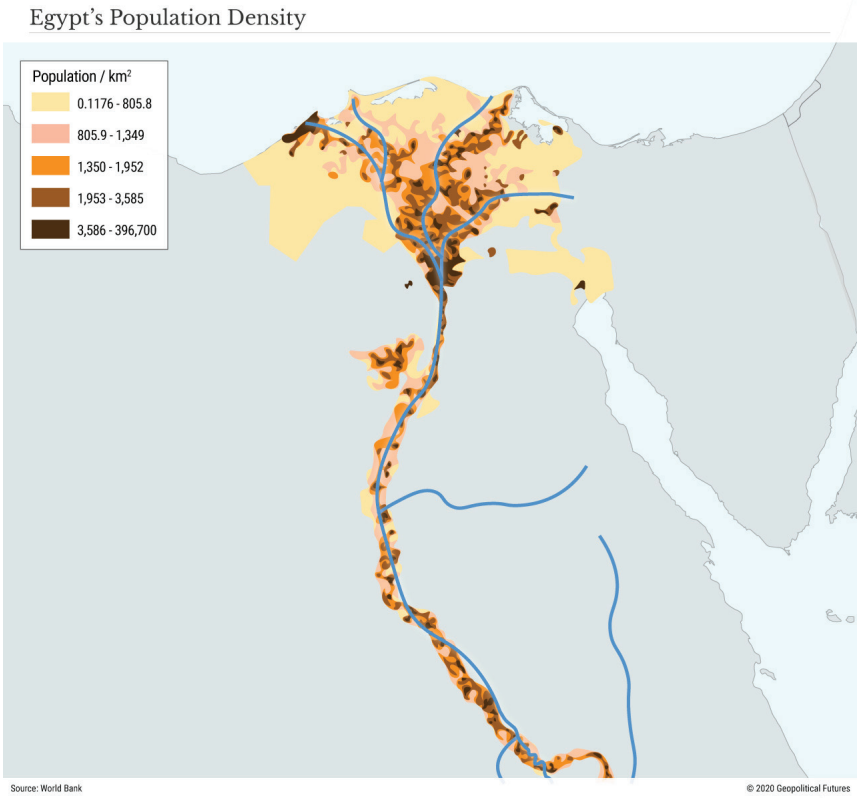
Egyptian leaders are unaccustomed to being criticized so publicly. The Egyptian media never criticized former President Gamal Abdel Nasser during his lifetime. After the 1967 Six-Day War, he accepted full responsibility for its disastrous outcome and admitted the failures of the armed forces. Still, the Egyptian public showered him with praise and believed he would lead them to victory. But Nasser knew how to communicate with the people, unlike el-Sissi, who in 2016 announced that he would deploy troops throughout the country in six hours after activists called for mass protests against the deal to give Riyadh control over the Red Sea islands.

Legacy of Apathy

There are many explanations for the Egyptian people's hesitation to rebel against repressive leaders. One argument attributes political inaction to the country's rule by foreigners – Persians, Romans and Arabian Muslim conquerors – for more than two millennia. Even prior to that time, Egypt was ruled for three millennia by the pharaohs, to whom Egyptians attached divine attributes that justified their absolute power.

Another explanation is that hydraulic societies promote political apathy because imperial dynasties monopolize water supplies and regulate their distribution. Egypt's population lives on just 5 percent of the country's 1 million square kilometers of land, making it easy for its rulers to control them in the flat and narrow plains.

The pharaohs' establishment of the world's first centralized state, when Menes united the delta and upper Egypt 5,000 years ago, enabled them to keep the population at bay under the hegemony of a powerful political entity. The historical experiences of a people brought together by destiny feed into their collective consciousness, which can either trigger or inhibit collective action. While individual Egyptians do take issue with the regime, these personal acts of defiance do not grow into widespread demands for reform. Those who do call for change become pessimistic over time, realizing they cannot mobilize their fellow citizens who fear government reprisal. Eventually, they reach the point of believing that they do not



stand a chance against the state's overwhelming machinery of coercion.

Stability and Tolerance

Despite the tendency toward apathy, Egypt has witnessed several bouts of unrest throughout its history. In 1919, a pro-independence uprising swept through Egypt after the British arrested nationalist leader Saad Zaghloul, who was later exiled. In 1922, the British declared Egypt an independent state and introduced a system of participatory politics – though they remained in control of the Suez Canal area. In 1968, workers at the Helwan industrial complex south of Cairo protested against the light prison sentences given to air force commanders deemed responsible for Egypt's defeat in the Six-Day War. In 1971-72, student demonstrations erupted against President Anwar Sadat's reluctance to go to war against Israel and liberate Sinai. (He reneged on a promise to end Israeli occupation before the end of 1971.)

But these public displays of discontent were short-lived. Egypt's agricultural society and predictable pattern of living engendered the development of a rich culture that puts a premium on stability and tolerance. Egyptians welcomed Alexander the Great as their liberator from the Persians and treated him as a deity. They accepted the Ptolemaic Kingdom that succeeded him, especially after its kings immersed themselves in the Egyptian way of life. Egyptians even accepted Cleopatra, who was of Macedonian heritage, as one of them. After succumbing to the Roman Empire and its Byzantine successor, they did not resist the Muslim conquest in the 7th century and appreciated the Arab military commander Amr ibn al-As for freeing them from Byzantine rule. They adopted the Arabic language, unlike, for example, the Persians and Turks, who adopted Islam but clung to their own language and cultural heritage.

When the Fatimids conquered Egypt in 969, Egyptians converted to Shiism. Then, in 1169, when Saladin gained control over Egypt, they reverted back to Sunnism. They did not resist the French, who occupied Egypt between 1798 and 1801 – in part because the French brought with them modernization and, unlike the Mamluks, treated the Egyptians with respect. The Ottomans sent Muhammad Ali, an Albanian army officer, to Egypt to rein in the Mamluks after the French departure, but he established a dynasty that lasted from 1805 until 1952. He founded modern Egypt, making it a cultural, educational and literary hub.

Disappointment With Self-Rule

In 1952, Egyptian army officers staged a military coup, which eventually led to Nasser taking the reins of power. He wanted to develop Egypt economically but got bogged down in military adventures throughout the region. He led Egypt from one disaster to another: the 1956 Suez War, the Yemen War and the disastrous Six-Day War. Yet, Egyptians did not hold him accountable for his erratic policies, and many still view him as a national hero. After Nasser's untimely death in 1970, Anwar Sadat became president. He deconstructed Nasser's socialist economy, introduced neoliberalism and created a class of nouveau riche business entrepreneurs. In 1977, hundreds of thousands of poor Egyptians protested against the government's curtailing of food subsidies – though they made no political demands. Sadat found it more practical to reinstate the subsidies and ignore the recommendations of international financial donors. Hosni Mubarak, who succeeded Sadat after his assassination in 1981, allied with the neoliberal class and allowed the army to become a significant economic player, to the detriment of

most Egyptians, who languished in poverty. In 2008, the rise of the April 6 reform movement – a coalition of young activists and organized labor – was a testament to the Mubarak regime's decay and the armed forces' resentment of his scheme to have his son Gamal succeed him.

The torture and brutal killing in June 2010 of an innocent young pharmacist triggered short-lived and inconsequential protests in Cairo and Alexandria. In contrast, the uprising in Tunisia in 2010 that followed the death of a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi – who set himself on fire after being harassed by police – triggered the Arab Spring protests and reminded Egyptians of the excesses of their country's security forces. The ouster of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after 24 years in office gave Egyptians hope that they could do the same.

After Mubarak resigned following mass protests, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces allowed Mohammed Morsi to become president with the intention of deposing him and reclaiming complete political control. Politically inept, Morsi angered many Egyptians, and the military overthrew him in 2013. El-Sissi became president in 2014 and continues to maintain a tight grip on power.

Under his leadership, authoritarian rule in Egypt has reached a new peak. Egypt's history and geographic isolation have led many Egyptians to accept the country's despotic leadership, believing that better days are ahead. But Egyptian society can flourish under the management of a bold leader – which it hasn't had in decades.

5 | Why Sudan Matters

The country's descent into full-scale war would have implications far beyond its borders.

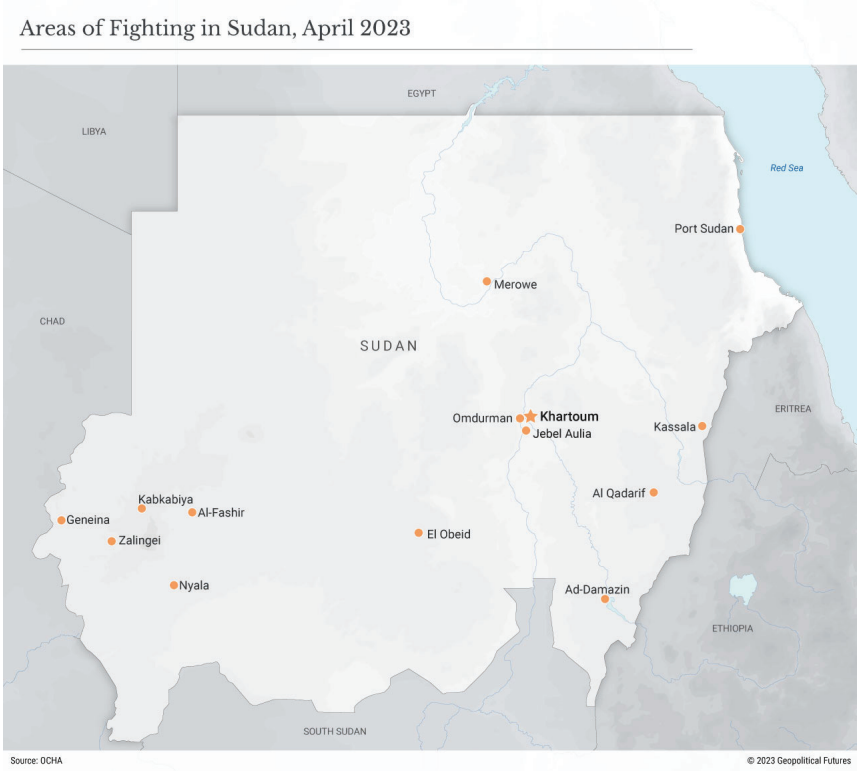
April 27, 2023 | Hilal Khashan

Since declaring its independence in 1956, Sudan has been beset by conflict. The country lies in an unstable region on the edge of the Red Sea, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. Five of its seven neighboring countries have experienced some degree of turmoil in the past few years. The current fighting, centered in the country's capital and key cities, has already drawn the attention of world powers. Many foreign governments have evacuated their nationals in recent days, as the fighting has spread to all of Sudan's 18 provinces. The emerging humanitarian crisis is also causing concern for Sudan's neighbors and international relief organizations. The country could be headed for full-fledged war and even disintegration, which would have broader implications for the Middle East and much of sub-Saharan Africa.

Sudan's Potential and Pitfalls

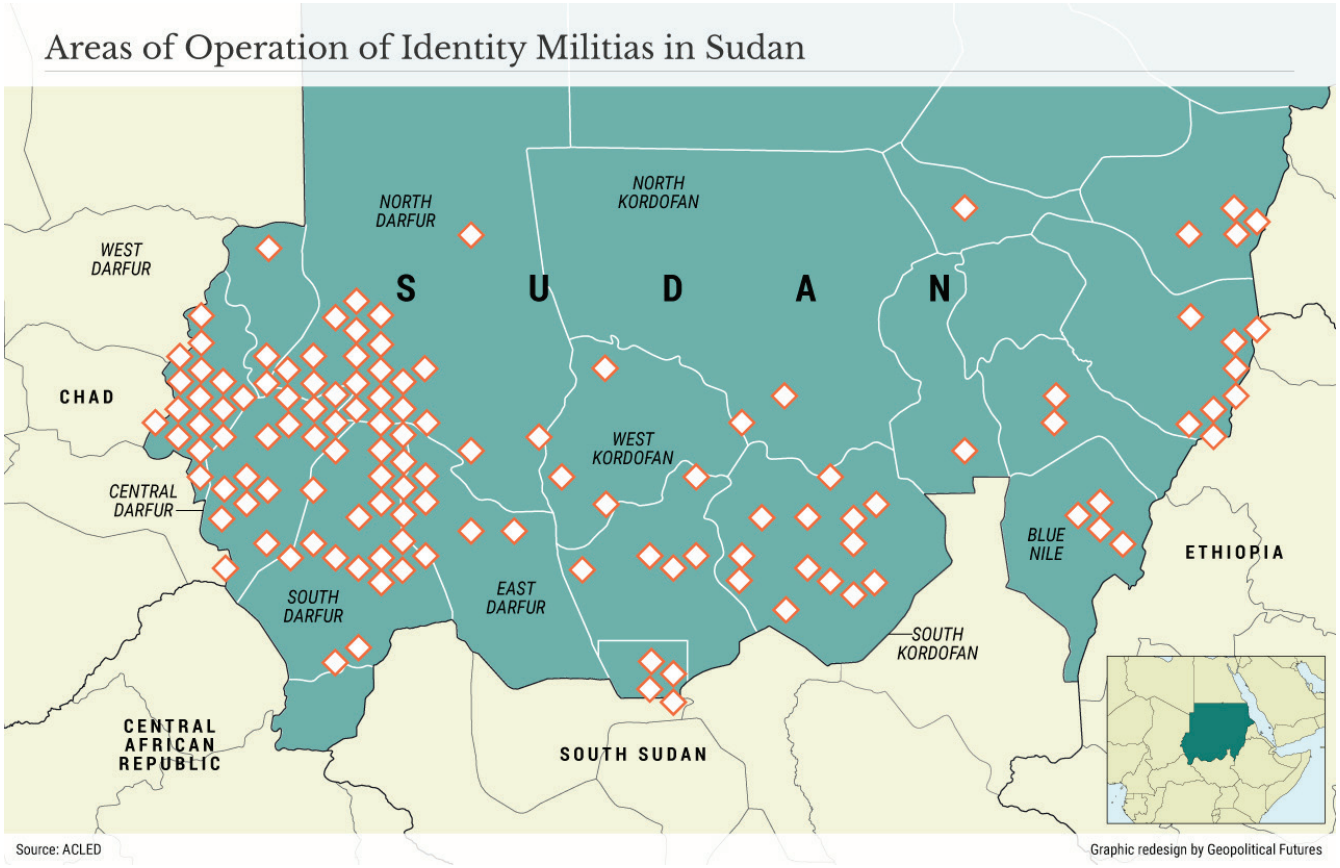
Sudan accounts for 10 percent of the Arab world's population and more than 35 percent of its arable land. It is rich in resources, including iron, copper, silver, mica, talc, manganese, chromium and platinum, as well as black sand, gold, marble and other minerals. However, the country also has many agricultural, livestock and mineral resources that have been left untapped. That's because successive governments since independence have failed to exploit the country's economic potential, exhausted by political crises, ethnic wars and military coups.

Following the ouster in 2019 of President Omar al-Bashir, who seized power in a 1989 coup, the relevant parties in Sudan agreed to an internationally backed plan to transition the government to civilian rule. However, the deal is now being undermined by the fighting in Khartoum between the army, commanded by Abdel-Fattah Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (widely known as Hemedti). The relationship between the two generals became strained because of Burhan's insistence on integrating the RSF into the Sudanese army, which Hemedti considered an attempt to liquidate him politically. Both helped to overthrew



the al-Bashir regime but then turned against civilian politicians who were calling for democratization. Now they're turning against each other.

While Burhan has not spoken to the media since clashes began on April 15, Hemedti has taken to social media to call on the international community for support in his fight against what he called Islamist extremists. His appeal for help was driven by the fact that the military situation in the country did not go as Hemedti expected. His support for civilian rule, campaign against extremists and implicit request for help from Israel are nothing but a smokescreen from a militant leader who accumulated great wealth and power through illicit means. Indeed, the RSF committed massacres in Darfur and allied with counterrevolutionaries to defeat the 2011 uprising in Libya, where RSF fighters have played an active role in the protracted civil war.



In 2021 and 2022, mercenaries from Russia's private military company the Wagner Group provided training for the RSF in areas of Libya controlled by Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army. For Wagner, the RSF provides a critical link between its logistics centers in Libya and its battlefields in Mali and the Central African Republic. However, supporting Hemedti's forces could be costly for Wagner and Haftar. There are concerns within the LNA leadership that association with Hemedti could jeopardize Haftar's relationship with Egypt, his primary source of military aid. He has thus decided to curtail his relationship with the RSF.

Refugee Crisis

In recent years, Sudan has become a transit route for migrants heading to Europe via Libya, as smugglers take advantage of the instability in the region to promise refugees passage across the Mediterranean. It's also a major source of migrants fleeing to Europe and neighboring countries. Sudan itself hosts 800,000 refugees from South Sudan. A mass return could further strain efforts to deliver essential aid to the more than two million displaced people in South Sudan who fled the north after the south gained independence in 2011.

The recent fighting has driven thousands of Sudanese refugees to Chad, Sudan's impoverished western neighbor where more than 400,000 displaced Sudanese sought refuge during previous conflicts. The country is concerned that the crisis could spill over across their shared border into areas that had experienced years of ethnic fighting and now host thousands of refugees, many from Darfur. During the bloody conflict in Darfur, Arab militias known as the Janjaweed, which eventually evolved into the RSF, frequently carried out raids in Chad, attacking refugees and marauding villagers.

Egypt is also concerned about a potential influx of refugees. Economic conditions in Egypt are already deteriorating, meaning the country would find it difficult to cope with an inundation of migrants. Sudan's implosion could also aggravate Egypt's security challenges by facilitating the smuggling of weapons and radical Islamists into its Nile River Valley and Delta heartland.

The Sudanese crisis also raises concerns for Israel. Thousands of African migrants, primarily from Sudan, flee to Israel each year. Since 2017, successive Israeli governments have issued temporary residency permits to these refugees while trying to repatriate them to their countries of origin. This issue prompted Israel to accelerate talks on normalizing ties with Sudan. Since agreeing to establish diplomatic relations with Khartoum in 2020, the Israeli government has sought to reach a deal that could see some of the migrants returned home.

Foreign Dimensions

Sudan has long been an arena of confrontation for regional and global powers. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have long sought to intervene in Sudan and saw the ouster of former Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir as a step toward rolling back the influence of Islamists in the country and bringing stability to the region. Saudi and UAE business leaders have invested in ambitious projects in Sudan, especially in agriculture, aviation and ports on the Red Sea coast.

However, some are wary about Saudi Arabia and the UAE's growing influence there. Egypt, in particular, is uneasy about Sudan's increasing cooperation with the Gulf countries and Turkey in the agricultural sector. These types of collaborations can over time undermine Cairo's traditional role in Sudan and erode its prospects for economic cooperation with Khartoum. Egypt also fears that Turkish and Gulf agricultural investments will lead to the expansion of dams on the Nile River in Sudan, which could deplete Egypt's own share of the Nile's waters. Sudan's descent into full-fledged war would have repercussions for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, on which Egypt has coordinated closely with Sudan. If Sudan were to disintegrate, Egypt would have to deal with warring mini-states, further weakening its position.

Bogged down with internal political and economic problems, Egypt is increasingly losing its ability to wield influence in the region, leaving a vacuum in Sudan that has largely been filled by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The U.S. secretary of state's communications with the Saudi and Emirati foreign ministers on the Sudan issue attests to Egypt's declining regional role. Last year, Egypt sent warplanes and pilots to support the Sudanese army. The RSF captured them at Merowe airport and released them only after the UAE mediated an agreement with Hemedti. Egypt and other regional countries worry that Sudan could become another Somalia, leading to the rise of more armed militias. Given the U.S.' withdrawal from the region in recent years, the security situation could get out of control if another conflict erupts, threatening the stability of the Middle East and the Horn of Africa.

Meanwhile, the South Sudanese government says the fighting has already hampered the export of 170,000 barrels of oil per day via Port Sudan. However, considering that Sudan receives $9 per barrel in transit fees, it's not in the interest of either side in the conflict to block the pipeline that delivers South Sudanese oil to the port.

If the violence continues, the involvement of foreign actors will only complicate the prospects for peace. Chad fears that rebels operating on its territory could receive support from the Wagner Group in the neighboring Central African Republic, which has close ties with the RSF. The fighting will likely spill over into both countries and other parts of the troubled region. Israel is concerned about the rapprochement between Russia and Iran and their presence in the Red Sea. It has therefore sought to include Sudan in the Negev Forum, which grew out of the Arab-Israeli normalization process, to demonstrate its desire to access the Red Sea and address Russia and Iran's growing naval presence there. Sudan's deterioration could put this process in jeopardy.

Bleak Prospects

Burhan cannot rule the country alone. He needs to enter into power-sharing agreements with other political parties but lacks the support to do so. None of the two belligerents in this conflict will be able to achieve a decisive political or military victory, in part because the country's political landscape is so fractured. The two combatants are allied with different political factions vying for inclusion and a share of the spoils of a potential full-scale war.

Sudan is now in danger of joining the list of Arab countries that have fallen into protracted civil wars, possibly ending in a de facto partition. Its descent into tribal warfare would eliminate any possibility of a swift resolution to the conflict and rule out the potential for reunification, especially considering that the Sudanese army is comprised of the country's diverse ethnic groups. More than a decade after the start of the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, Sudan might be facing a similar fate.

6 | The Trouble With Establishing Democracy in Sudan

The fragmented country has seen only intermittent periods of democratic rule.

November 4, 2021 | Hilal Khashan

Since gaining independence from the British in 1956, Sudan has experienced only intermittent periods of democratic rule. Although the British encouraged the rise of political parties and empowered national governments as early as 1952, the post-independence democratic governments that emerged didn't last long and were overrun by military dictatorships. The overthrow of strongman leader Omar al-Bashir in 2019 gave many hope that democracy might return to Sudan. The reality, however, is that the complexities of Sudanese society make authoritarian leaders better positioned to hold onto power and the establishment of a stable democracy all but impossible.

Turbulent Foundations

Sudan's modern history goes back to 1820 when Egyptian ruler Mohammad Ali sent an army led by his son Ismail to expand his territorial gains in the south. The Egyptians' mistreatment of Sudan triggered the emergence of the Mahdist religious movement, which in 1883 destroyed an Egyptian army of 10,000 soldiers. Two years later, the Mahdists entered Khartoum and killed British army officer Charles Gordon. In 1899, a joint British-Egyptian army marched on Khartoum and established the Condominium of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, which lasted until 1956 when Prime Minister Ismail al-Azhari, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, announced Sudan's independence.

Less than three years later, Gen. Ibrahim Abboud staged a military coup. He suspended the constitution, dismissed the parliament and dismantled the leftist political parties. Abboud antagonized most of Sudan's political factions and alienated southern Sudan by launching a campaign to Arabize and Islamize its Christian and animist population. Bureaucratic corruption, poor economic performance (despite some initial success) and total absence of financial transparency forced him to resign in 1964 following a popular uprising.

In 1969, Col. Jaafar Nimeiri overthrew the civilian government of Muhammad Ahmad Mahgoub, leader of the centrist Islamic National Ummah Party, two years after parliament elected him to preside over the government. He succeeded another leader from the same party, Sadiq al-Mahdi, who resigned following a legislative censure over a row with the National Ummah Party, his coalition partner. Disenchantment with his corrupt regime led to a surge in popularity for the Muslim Brotherhood. The situation compelled Nimeiri to work with National Islamic Front religious scholar Hassan al-Turabi. He influenced Nimeiri to violate the terms of the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement with the south by introducing sharia law there and banning alcohol consumption even among non-Muslims.

Nimeiri was ousted in a popular uprising in 1985. The Sudanese army appointed the high-

est-ranking officer, Gen. Abdel Rahman Swar al-Dahab, to head the transitional council before general elections could be held and a new government elected. Setting a new precedent in Sudanese and Arab politics, he willingly relinquished power after the 1986 elections in which al-Mahdi was again elected as prime minister. He held his position until 1989, when he was ousted in a coup led by Gen. Omar al-Bashir.

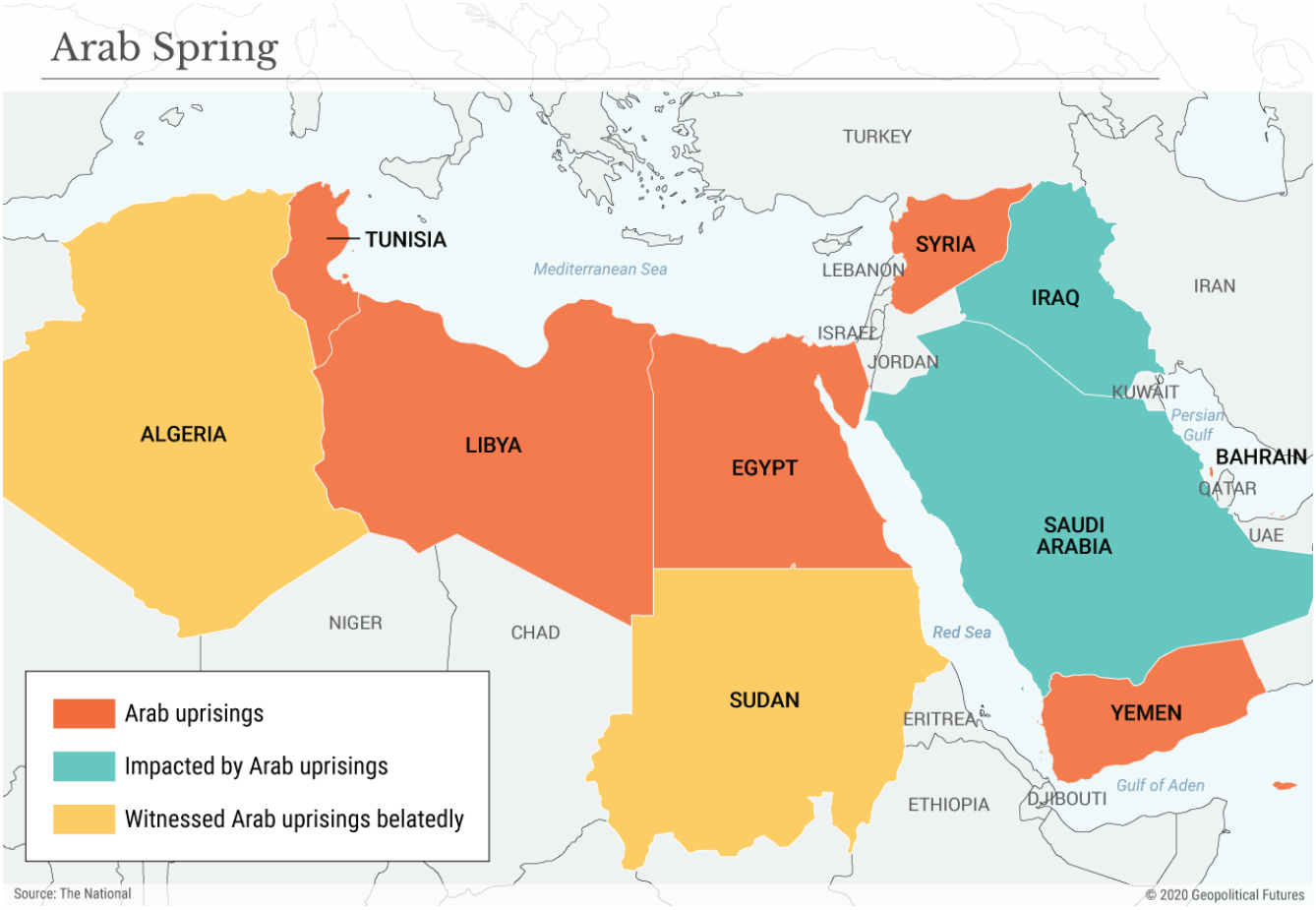
This began al-Bashir's 30 years in power, a disastrous period for the country. In 2011, the south seceded and declared its independence. The armed conflict in Darfur between 2003 and 2009 wreaked havoc on the local population. Al-Bashir was allied with the Janjaweed militia, which massacred scores of innocent civilians, leading to his indictment in the International Criminal Court. Due to persistent economic and political marginalization, the conflict spread to other provinces, namely the Blue Nile, South Kordofan and Kassala in the east. Al-Bashir's irresponsible policies ruined the economy, leading to massive protests in December 2018 after the government tripled the price of bread. Four months into widespread unrest, Gen. Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan toppled al-Bashir and ordered his arrest. However, on democratic values, al-Burhan seems to follow a similar approach to his predecessors.

Unpropitious Reality

Sudanese politics are plagued with divisions: intra-military rivalries, civil-political fragmentation and military-civilian factionalism. In the 2019 demonstrations, concentrated largely at the army headquarters, protesters demanded that power be surrendered to civilians. The Rapid Support Forces, an extension of the army, dispersed the protesters using live fire, killing dozens of demonstrators. After arduous negotiations between the military and a coalition that represented the protesters called the Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change, the two sides signed in July 2019 a deal outlining a power-sharing agreement, as part of a three-year transitional period. The deal called for establishing a sovereignty council led by al-Burhan and a Cabinet headed by technocrat Abdallah Hamdok.

But Hamdok's austere economic reforms were unpopular in a country where per capita income stands at just $775, inflation

exceeds 360 percent and national debt totals $56 billion, or 260 percent of gross domestic product. The government also failed to bring to justice those responsible for the murder of activists during al-Bashir's rule and the 2019 uprising. The declining popularity of Hamdok's transitional government led to al-Burhan's decision to stage a coup last month. Al-Burhan dismissed the Cabinet and ordered Hamdok arrested.



The Sudanese armed forces are reluctant to authorize transitional parliamentary elections, fearing they would make the military accountable for its actions and answerable to the legislature. The power-sharing agreement failed because the military refused to allow the civilian government to oversee the security reforms and break its control over money-making businesses in agriculture, poultry and infrastructure. But decades of gross financial mismanagement amid political instability have taken a toll on the economy. Last year, the government even declared a state of economic emergency after the value of the Sudanese pound crashed.

In addition, the military refused to integrate paramilitary groups and militias into the regular army and insisted on controlling Sudan's foreign policy, including signing a peace treaty with Israel despite Hamdok's reservations. During the negotiations between the military and the Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change, al-Burhan visited Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to gauge opinion on the negotiated agreement, especially since Ri-

yadh and Abu Dhabi are Sudan's key foreign donors. When Saudi Arabia launched its military campaign against the Houthi rebels in Yemen in 2015, al-Burhan dispatched Sudanese troops to fight on its behalf.

The military, led by al-Burhan, insists on introducing a presidential system of government. Civilians, meanwhile, want a modern civil state. Sudan's civil society organizations have grown markedly over the past four decades because of the country's persistent conflicts and the government's withdrawal from the public sphere. As the government failed to provide for people's needs, the international community stepped in with humanitarian aid. But though the rise of civil society facilitated the overthrow of Sudan's dictatorship, it failed to set the stage for the emergence of a modern state because of its lack of cohesion and contradictory demands.

Most Sudanese civil society organizations are lobby groups that don't understand that political change and democratic transition are the best means through which to meet their objectives. To make things worse, Sudan does not have a significant number of national nongovernmental organizations. The civil society sector lacks organizational capabilities and suffers from fragmentation along ethnic, tribal, regional and political lines.

Sudan's political system is also fragmented, with 42 active political parties that continuously shift their alliances. It's not unusual for leftist parties to join conservative parties and vice versa. Parties usually do not articulate political ideologies, manifest organizational skills or present coherent policy demands. They are opportunistic and display an inability to communicate and articulate collective needs. Their behavior is akin to political nomadism. Sudan's two main political forces, the National Ummah Party and the Democratic Unionist Party, are sectarian. They exalt the party leader and promote pan-Arab identity, ignoring Sudan's cultural and ethnic mosaic.

The involvement of outside players like Saudi Arabia and the UAE has also been counterproductive. Very few Sudanese believe that these two countries want to see democracy flourish in Sudan. With 570 tribes, 57 ethnic groups and 114 spoken and written languages, Sudan is a complex and fractured nation. This makes the task of introducing a new democratic system extraordinarily challenging.

7 | How Sudanese Mercenaries Fuel the Conflicts in Yemen and Libya

Facing a lack of opportunities at home, Sudanese youths are vulnerable to recruitment into foreign conflicts.

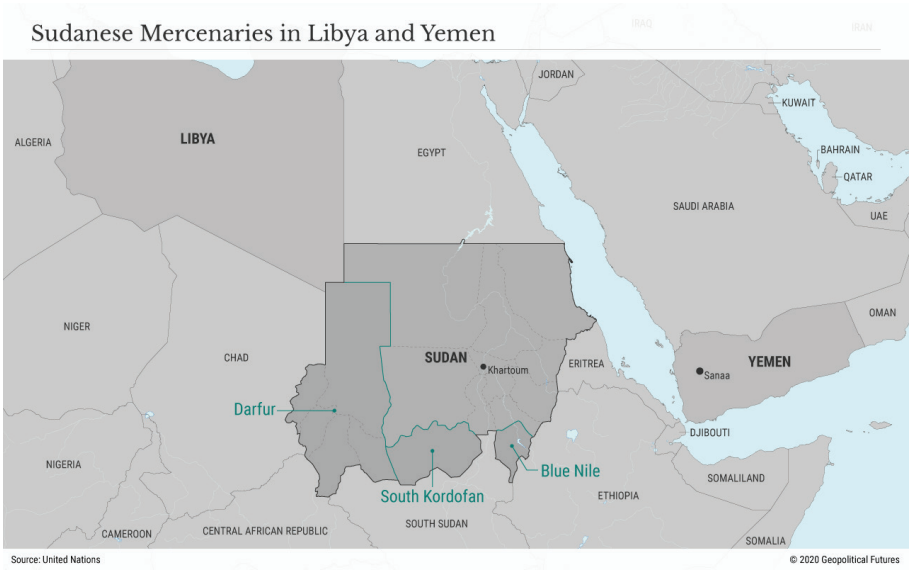
August 14, 2020 | Hilal Khashan

Sudan is a country of contradictions. It has untapped natural resources and fertile land that could feed the entire Arab region. Yet the majority of its people are poor and hungry, and the country's gross domestic product per capita is only $700. It has a robust and dynamic civil society, but since shortly after its independence in 1956, Sudan has been plagued by a succession of military dictatorships with brief democratic interludes. Despite its enormous economic potential, it has turned into a satellite state desperate for foreign aid as a result of the corruption, lack of vision, and ethnic and tribal wars that have afflicted it. It's this sad reality that has made Sudan's young population vulnerable to recruitment by armies and militias fighting the region's two prolonged and bloody civil wars.

Yemen

In 2015, Sudan became involved in Operation Firmness Storm, the Saudi-led campaign to dislodge the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, who seized power in a military coup in 1989, said his country's intervention would help restore the power of the legitimate government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi after the Houthis captured the capital, Sanaa, in September 2014. Knowing that this reasoning wouldn't resonate with the Sudanese people, al-Bashir emphasized that the Sudanese army would help stop the spread of Shiism in Yemen and safeguard the holy Muslim shrines in Mecca and Medina.

In reality, however, economic considerations drove al-Bashir's decision to send troops to Yemen. Sudan lost at least 75 percent of its revenue after the secession of the oil-rich south in 2011. And in 2012, Saudi King Abdullah was hesitant to offer Sudan financial aid during al-Bashir's visit to Riyadh because of al-Bashir's close relations with Iran and Turkey, even though Sudan had been distancing itself from Iran for years, even shutting down all Iranian cultural centers in 2014, claiming that they threatened Sudan's intellectual and social fabric.



Soon after the war started with a series of extensive air raids

against the Houthis' strongholds in Yemen's rugged mountainous terrain, it became clear that a military breakthrough would require a massive ground offensive. Neither the Saudis nor the Emiratis were willing to commit ground forces to the battle. Both Pakistan and Egypt refused to involve themselves in military operations on the ground and advised Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to refrain from military escalation. The crown prince then asked for the support of al-Bashir, who put 40,000 Sudanese army troops under Saudi command during the height of the war in 2015-17.

The Saudis compensated Sudanese troops with a monthly salary equal to $5,500 for enlisted soldiers and over $8,200 for commissioned officers, more than the total compensation for 40 years of service in Sudan. Sudanese soldiers competed to go to Yemen, and those the selection committee approved were required to pay one month's salary to its members. In addition, al-Bashir admitted that he received $90 million in cash for joining the Saudi war effort in Yemen.

Saudi commanders treated the Sudanese as expendable foot soldiers. They sent them on dangerous missions, which explains their heavy casualties – according to the Houthis, Sudanese casualties exceeded 8,000 men, including more than 4,200 dead. The high ratio of dead-to-wounded soldiers attests to the reckless manner in which the Saudis deployed the Sudanese.

Sudan's involvement in the Yemeni conflict outraged its civil society. Many saw little justification for being there, especially after the United Arab Emirates' ambassador in Washington said the anti-Houthi intervention was aimed at spreading secularism throughout the region, contradicting al-Bashir's claim that Sudanese troops in Yemen were defending Islam's most sacred religious sites. It became clear that Sudan's military venture in Yemen was nothing more than a financial transaction paid dearly in blood.

Libya

Sudan's involvement in the Libyan conflict differs from its role in Yemen. During the peak of the war in Yemen, one-third of the Sudanese army was sent to the country. After al-Bashir's ouster in 2019, the deputy leader of Sudan's military council and commander of the Rapid Support Forces, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, generally known as Hemedti, withdrew most Sudanese troops from Yemen and left only a token force to train military personnel. In the Libyan conflict, Hemedti sent the RSF and organized militiamen to support Khalifa Haftar's Tobruk-based Libyan National Army (though he has publicly denied doing so) and clamped down on private mercenaries' involvement for fear they might join the forces of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord.

Two months ago, the RSF arrested 122 nationals, including children, who were on their way to join the Libyan conflict as mercenaries. Last February, it arrested 243 people in Darfur headed for Libya. The UAE is known to train Sudanese recruits in the town of Ghayathi, west of Abu Dhabi, before dispatching them to Benghazi, Sirte, Ras Lanuf and al-Jufra air base. Once in Libya, they are deployed to various battlefields to fight on Haftar's behalf.

Many Sudanese men have accused the UAE's Black Shield Security Services Co. of promising them jobs as security guards in UAE hospitals and shopping centers before deploying them

to Libya. Many extremely poor young Sudanese men in the provinces of South Kordofan and Blue Nile have been paid as little as $25 per month to fight in the war. It's impossible to know the exact number of Sudanese mercenaries who have fought in Libya, since militias on both sides of the conflict don't coordinate with the government in Khartoum. But there are at least 3,000 Sudanese mercenaries fighting in Libya for the Janjaweed, an Arab paramilitary militia that was also active in Darfur during the 2003-09 war and the leading Sudanese group backing Haftar's forces.

Sudanese fighters, from both the RSF and individual militias, comprise 50 percent of Haftar's main battle force and played a decisive role in his capture of Libya's oil crescent in June 2018. Wary that Abu Dhabi might suspend financial support for Khartoum, Sudan has delivered a steady stream of RSF fighters to serve under Haftar's command. In July 2019, UAE transport planes helped deploy 1,000 RSF troops to defend Benghazi, allowing Haftar's own forces to focus on the battle for Tripoli. Even though the UAE reneged on its promise to donate $2.5 billion to Sudan's transitional military council after al-Bashir's overthrow in 2019, Hemedti has been personally rewarded for his loyalty. The UAE purchases almost all of the output from Darfur's gold mines, which are under Hemedti's control.

In addition to the Janjaweed, two other large rebel groups that fought in Darfur, the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement, have also participated in the Libyan war. With the conflicts in South Kordofan, the Blue Nile, Darfur and Kassala mitigated, and the country's economy still weak, the rank and file of the RSF and various militias were left without work and vulnerable to recruitment. For them, the Libyan war was a potential source of revenue and arms that they couldn't find at home.

Legacy of War and Turmoil

Before the south gained independence in 2011, Sudan was the largest country in Africa and had enormous economic potential, especially in the agricultural sector. Instead of pursuing policies to mend its ethnic, religious, tribal and regional differences, the ruling elite in the north adopted sweeping policies of Islamization and Arabization and ignored the peripheral regions of this vast country. These policies triggered enormous civil strife and impoverished the population. The fall of al-Bashir's regime gave people hope that political and economic change would follow, but the country continues to struggle with severe problems on both fronts. Economically, its public debt exceeds 122 percent of GDP, its inflation rate is at 70 percent and unemployment is soaring. Politically, democratic transition remains elusive. It's unclear if the country's new ruling class is serious about relaunching the economy and opening the political system. But if it isn't, Sudan's youths will continue to serve as the fuel that keeps the region's conflicts going.

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MISSON STATEMENT

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