



PERSPECTIVES

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Russia Joins Gulf States in Coaching Sudan's Military

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Russia has emerged as Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's silent partner in assisting the Sudanese military's efforts to weaken, if not defeat, a months-long popular revolt that has already toppled president Omar Bashir.

Documents leaked to [The Guardian](#) and [MHK Media](#), a Russian-language news website, by the London-based Dossier Centre, an investigative group funded by exiled Russian businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky, have disclosed Russia's hitherto behind-the-scenes role in Sudan.

Laying out plans to bolster Russia's position across Africa by building relations with rulers, striking military deals, and grooming a new generation of leaders and undercover agents, the documents included details of a campaign to smear anti-government protesters in Sudan.

The plan for the campaign appeared to have been copy-pasted from proposals to counter opposition in Russia to President Vladimir Putin with references to Russia mistakenly not having been replaced with Sudan in one document.

Russia advised the Sudanese military to use fake news and videos to portray demonstrators as anti-Islamic, pro-Israeli and pro-LGBT. The plan also suggested increasing the price of newsprint to make it harder for critics to get their message out and to discover "foreigners" at anti-government rallies.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, a St. Petersburg-based businessman and close associate of Putin, complained in a letter to Bashir before he was overthrown that the president was not following his advice.

Prigozhin, who was indicted by US Special Counsel Robert Mueller for operating a troll factory that ran an extensive social media campaign that favored Donald J. Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, was, according to the documents, a key player in efforts to enhance Russian influence in Africa.

Prigozhin accused Bashir and his government of not being active enough and adopting an "extremely cautious position."

If one judges from a visit this week to Sudan by foreign journalists at the invitation of the military to show them medical facilities that had allegedly been ransacked by protesters, and to demonstrate that hospitals that had been attacked by notorious paramilitary forces associated with Sudanese army were returning to normal, Prigozhin's criticism may have merit.

"It must have seemed like a good idea to somebody, although I cannot imagine why. The plan was to show us how terribly the protesters had behaved. If the world could see what they were really like they would understand that the regime had no choice but to send in the militia. Except [from the moment we arrived at the first medical facility things started to go wrong](#)," said the BBC's Africa editor, Fergal Keane.

To Keane, the omnipresence of paramilitaries of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) made the paramilitary headed by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo aka Hemedti, believed to be a Saudi and UAE favorite because his troops fought in Yemen and he has a reputation for ruthlessness, look "more like an army of occupation than an internal security force."

Widely viewed as ambitious and power hungry, General Dagalo resembles in the eyes of protesters Abdel Fattah Sisi, the autocratic general-turned-president who in 2013 staged a Saudi-UAE-backed military coup that toppled Egypt's first and only democratically elected president.

Defending the UAE's contacts with the military council, Emirati minister of state for foreign affairs Anwar Gargash said his country's "credibility is our means to contribute to enhancing peaceful transition in a way that preserves the state and its institutions."

Human Rights Watch this week called on the UN Security Council to halt the withdrawal of peacekeepers from Darfur, noting that the Rapid Support Forces "have [a long track record of abuse](#). They carried out highly abusive counter-insurgency campaigns in Darfur and the Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile regions over the past five years, in which they attacked villages, killed and raped civilians, and burned and looted homes."

Witnesses outside a medical facility and a hospital that Keane visited countered the military's tale, describing how troops stormed the buildings and looted and destroyed facilities. "The international community has to intervene. There is no peace here in Sudan. People are suffering a lot... I am frightened for my country," said a man as he drove by Omdurman Hospital.

The failed PR tour, the crackdown, the Russian guidance, and stalled talks between protesters and the military fit a Saudi-UAE-promoted pattern that has evolved across the Middle East and North Africa since the 2011 popular Arab revolts. It's a pattern that aims to defeat popular protest at whatever cost.

The Sudanese protest movement has emerged from the crackdown that doctors said killed at least 118 people, and efforts to delegitimize it have left it [battered, divided, and potentially weakened, but still standing](#).

A general strike declared at the beginning of last week initially paralyzed the capital Khartoum but within a day or two appeared to be weakening.

Ethiopian mediator Mahmoud Dirir said the protesters had agreed to end the strike while the governing Transitional Military Council (TMC), headed by officers with close ties to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, was ready to release political prisoners, one of several key demands of the protesters.

Dirir said the two sides had also [agreed to "soon" resume talks to resolve the crisis](#) even if they were nowhere near narrowing differences of returning Sudan to civilian rule. It was not clear what soon meant.

"Negotiation - even if it happens soon - will circle back to the same issue: will the military cede power to a civilian government? [Nothing about the generals' actions has indicated that this is an imminent possibility](#). The fear is that they will use any negotiations to try to divide the opposition while security pressure is maintained on the streets," Keane said.

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