SITUATION UPDATE

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A History of Outsourced Violence: The Rise of the Rapid Support Forces, Libyan National Army, and Wagner Group

John Lechner

KEY FINDINGS

- The rise of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan has coincided with the growing power of militias and other paramilitary groups in the region. The links between RSF, the Libyan National Army (LNA), the Wagner Group, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) represent a convergence of local, regional, and global trends in the outsourcing of warfare.
- While the power of RSF, LNA, and other paramilitary groups rivals that of some nation-states, their rhetoric is anchored in state-centric notions of power and legitimacy, not the overturning of the state. This rhetoric is in contrast to non-state armed movements, such as the Islamic State (IS).
- Militia rule and war economies in Sudan's peripheries have fostered a market for mercenaries, deepening regional fragility and calling into question statist analytical frameworks.

Overview

On 15 April 2023, armed conflict erupted in Khartoum, Sudan,[1] between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary RSF. Led by Mohammed Hamdan 'Hemeti' Dagalo, RSF is a product of the Sudanese state and a beneficiary of Khartoum's past efforts to outsource counterinsurgency in the Darfur region (De Waal, 2004).

In the war against SAF, Hemeti and RSF have received material support from the Wagner Group and continue to be supported by Khalifa Haftar's LNA and the UAE (Ali, 2024; Badi, 2025). While these dynamics have developed within different local and historical contexts, behavioural similarities among them provide a basis for fruitful comparison.

Similar to RSF in relation to SAF, the LNA's military and economic strength rivals that of its adversary—the UN-recognized Government of National Unity (GNU). Meanwhile, the Wagner Group has advanced the foreign policy interests of the Russian Federation across Africa. In its role, the UAE—with limited military capacity—outsources foreign military ambitions to mercenaries and proxies. The reliance on non-state forces by the Russian Federation and the UAE, and earlier SAF with respect to RSF, reflects a practice with deep historical roots. Across Europe's early modern era, private warfare was commonplace, and these patterns of state outsourcing persist.

The evolution of outsourced warfare

For most of Europe's history, private armies and mercenaries were the standard (McFate, 2014). This began to shift in the 17th century when European states with greater access to capital and larger rural populations were in a position to maintain standing armies (Tilly, 1992). Yet private warfare found new opportunities in Europe's expanding colonial ambitions.

When colonial administrators arrived in Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they encountered formidable obstacles regarding terrain and governance. To overcome them, they embraced methods of value extraction and control by, inter alia, setting up roadblocks, raiding for labour, and outsourcing security to protect their interests. After independence, centralized post-colonial regimes employed similar tactics to exert control over populations and resources, with political elites consolidating their positions by leveraging access to, and gaining balance among, outside powers (Bayart, 2009). This mode of governance, however, tied many African states to cold war patronage networks, and when those networks collapsed in the late 1980s, external financial and military support—particularly in the form of US or Soviet backing—sharply declined.

While the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics focused on internal reform, western governments promoted privatization as the pathway to prosperity. Pressured by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to rein in public spending, some leaders, including Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, sold off state assets while contracting ethnic militias to fight on the government's behalf (Craze, 2024).

The 11 September 2001 attacks accelerated the US privatization of warfare. Other major powers, such as the Russian Federation, followed suit. As the Russian Federation transitioned to a professional force, it outsourced conscripted labour to the private sector (Maglov, Olevsky, and Treshchanin, 2019), opening the door for businessmen such as Yevgeny Prigozhin, the founder of the Wagner Group.

Sudan's own proxies

Bashir's reliance on ethnic militias traces back, in part, to 1983, when the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army—led by John Garang—launched its war against Khartoum, calling for a decentralized,

1 All locations will be fully indicated at first mention. This publication will then use the location's first level only.

secular state. The rebellion underscored Khartoum's vulnerability in the peripheries and the need to establish new regional security arrangements. Following the overthrow of President Jafaar Nimeri in 1985, Khartoum reached an agreement with Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, allowing Libya to maintain bases in Darfur for its war with Chad in exchange for weapons (Flint and De Waal, 2008). The flux of Chadian Arabs into Darfur sparked tensions with the Fur communities, and in the decade that followed, competition over land and resources became increasingly racialized between Arab and non-Arab groups. These dynamics laid the foundations for Khartoum's later strategy of governing through ethnic militias and deepening social divisions on which control depended.

Escalating violence triggered a rebellion among non-Arab communities, with the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) and Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). To suppress the rebellion, Khartoum supplied funding and weapons to Arab militia leaders, including Musa Hilal Abdallah and Juma Dagalo, Hemeti's uncle. These militias—often nomadic Arabs from the Sudan–Chad borderlands—came to be known as the *janjawid*, responsible for mass atrocities against the region's non-Arab populations (HRW, 2024).

Divisions within rebel groups emerged quickly, splitting the SLM/A. The SLA-Abdul Wahid al Nur (SLA-AW) was composed largely of Fur fighters, while the SLA-Minni Minawi (SLA-MM) drew from the Zaghawa. Khartoum's preferential arming of the janjawid also led to inter-Arab fighting (Flint, 2010), highlighting that outsourcing security can lead to fragmenting rival factions beyond the state sponsor's control.

As commander of the Border Guards militia, Hemeti started recruiting largely from the Rizeigat tribe in 2013. Over the next two years, RSF, together with SAF and other militias, significantly weakened the capacity of JEM, SLA-AW, and SLA-MM in Darfur. As RSF consolidated control of Darfur, Hemeti expanded his own economic empire.

Darfur is part of a larger economic and cultural region that includes southern Libya, eastern Chad, and northern Central African Republic (CAR)—areas beyond the reach of state militaries. In these peripheral areas, there is very little manufacturing, and most economic activity exists outside the formal sector. Value is extracted via acquisition (Lombard, 2020) or through taxation of people, commerce, cattle, and raw resources. This region has a long tradition of smuggling, shaped by shifting norms of what is considered licit or illicit at any given time.

When RSF and SAF offensives pushed rebel factions from much of Darfur, groups including SLA-AW and SLA-MM turned to the Libyan civil war for new sources of revenue. This marked a shift from local rebellion to participation in a regional war economy.

Proxy warfare and the post-Arab Spring

After sweeping through Tunisia and Egypt, the Arab Spring spread to Yemen in 2011, and then to Libya, where Qaddafi met protests with violence. When unrest reached Syria, Bashar al-Assad's regime responded with similar brutality, sparking significant army desertions.

In both Libya and Syria, Qatar leveraged connections to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist networks, providing them with weapons and funding. Pursuing a parallel strategy, the UAE and Saudi Arabia channelled support to secular insurgents. Among these Arab monarchies, there was little appetite or manpower to put their own soldiers on the ground.

Upon Libya's collapse in 2011, President Vladimir Putin blamed Dmitry Medvedev, the Russian Federation's president at that time, for allowing the NATO alliance to oust Qaddafi (Arutunyan, 2022). This blame partially set the stage for Putin's return to the presidency and the 2014 annexation of Crimea. In the war that followed in Ukraine's Donbas region, the Kremlin sought proxy forces to support separatists, and Prigozhin was in a perfect position to step in.

In 2015, Bashir was seeking wealthy allies amid deepening US sanctions and IMF pressure in Sudan

(Young, forthcoming). He cut ties with Iran—which was providing military training—and pivoted to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both of which needed fighters to confront Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen. Up to 40,000 Sudanese fighters (Magdy, 2019), along with 450 Latin Americans—mostly Colombian ex-soldiers—were deployed to the conflict with backing from the UAE (Calvo Ospina, 2024). The programme enriched men like Hemeti, who, for a time, transformed RSF into a quasi-mercenary recruitment agency (Abbas, 2023; Craze and Makawi, 2025). In 2016, the Wagner Group arrived in Khartoum,[2] laying the groundwork for the November 2017 agreements between the Russian Federation and Sudan on military training and gold mining (Russian Federation Government, 2017a; 2017b).

First connections

The Libyan civil wars in the mid-2010s catalysed the formation of cross-border networks of warlords, private military companies (PMCs), and state sponsors that continue to shape the regional war economy. In 2015, Haftar began consolidating power in anti-Islamist terms, becoming LNA commander in eastern Libya. The threat from the IS in Derna, Libya, meant Haftar had little trouble finding support from Egypt and the UAE, who provided funds and advisors for his campaign. By late 2015, Haftar turned his ambitions to Libya's oil crescent, a move that required more men. For his 2016 campaign, Haftar hired SLA-AW and SLA-MM fighters.

Hilal, the former janjawid commander, also had men in Libya. In 2017, tensions peaked between the Mahamid tribe and Hemeti when Khartoum tried to integrate Hilal's Border Guards into Hemeti's RSF (UNSC, 2017). That November, Hilal was arrested, and his mining assets were seized and handed over to RSF. Hemeti was then given permission to sell gold, further cementing his relationship with the UAE.

Around this time, Prigozhin—encouraged by Emirati representatives—invested in Hemeti's burgeoning business empire,[3] further expanding the Wagner Group's existing network within Sudan's formal security branches. In 2018, Prigozhin's men worked closely with Sudan's Ministry of Defence and the National Intelligence and Security Services to broker a peace deal—known as the Khartoum Accord—between the CAR government and 14 armed groups (UNSC, 2019). Wagner Group instructors had arrived in CAR to train the nation's security service personnel, while companies tied to Prigozhin in Sudan received mining concessions.

In the summer of 2018, Prigozhin's men began arriving in Libya. The Russian Federation's military intelligence agency—which worked closely with Prigozhin—had marginalized other Russian security players in Haftar's territory as early as 2016 (Weiss, Grozev, and Dobrokhotov, 2024).[4]

The missing link: Chad

Despite Chadian leader Idriss Déby's declared neutrality during Bashir's early 2000s counter-insurgency, he could not prevent Chadian and Sudanese Zaghawa from supporting rebels in Darfur (Marchal, 2024). In response, Khartoum backed Chadian coalitions to launch attacks on N'Djamena, Chad, among them the Gorane and Tubu Union des Forces pour la Démocratie et le Développement (UFDD), the largely Arab Union des Forces pour la Démocratie et le Développement-Fondamental, and the Zaghawa-dominated Rassemblement des Forces pour le Changement (RFC) (Tubiana, 2008; Picco, 2023).

In 2008, these groups attacked N'Djamena again, prompting Déby to call reinforcements from the largely Zaghawa JEM for defence. Déby funded JEM's attack on Omdurman, Sudan, illustrating the reciprocal patterns of proxy warfare. By 2010, Bashir and Déby came to an agreement, and Déby pushed

2 Author interview with a Wagner Group associate, location withheld, June 2023.

3 Author interview with a source close to events, location withheld, February 2024.

4 These facts were confirmed by author interviews with two sources close to the events, location withheld, February 2024.

JEM to negotiate with Khartoum, while Bashir stopped funding to the Chadian rebels. Many UFDD and RFC fighters subsequently moved into Libya. These cycles of support and retaliation entrenched a regional system of rebellion and transformed interstate relations, blurring national security policy with proxy warfare.

In 2016, Mahamat Mahdi Ali left the UFDD in Libya to create Le Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (FACT). FACT initially partnered with the Misrati militias in southern Libya. Haftar bribed FACT fighters to work with him as he consolidated control over Libya's southern region. Thus, Libya became a centre for Chadian and Sudanese armed politics.

Chad emerged as a thread linking together the wars in Darfur, Libya, and CAR, yet the networks fuelling cross-border war economies began to fracture under competing interests.

Relationships put to the test

The UAE had helped connect Hemeti, Haftar, and Prigozhin, an emergent network bound by transactional interests, not ideological pursuit.

In early 2019, Haftar's forces launched an offensive in southern Libya before attacking Tripoli, Libya, in April. A week later, Sudan's military overthrew Bashir in Khartoum, and Abdel Fattah al-Burhan assumed leadership of the Transitional Military Council with Hemeti appointed as his deputy, disrupting the UAE's and Prigozhin's foothold in Sudan.

As the LNA's advance stalled in Libya, Prigozhin's men took a more direct role in the fighting,[5] with operations heavily subsidized by the UAE (Rondeaux, Imhof, and Margolin, 2021). The offensive also drew in Darfur rebel groups to support LNA, including the Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces, Sudan Liberation Movement/Army-Transitional Council, SLA-AW, and Hilal's Sudanese Revolutionary Awakening Council (UNSC, 2021). The UAE was believed to be funding these groups and cultivating ties with their leaders (UNSC, 2021).

In November 2019, Tripoli's Government of National Accord signed a maritime agreement with Turkey. Subsequent to that, Turkish military assistance—including advisors, air defence systems, Bayraktar drones, and Turkish-financed Syrian mercenaries—changed the course of the war against LNA,[6] forcing the Wagner Group's withdrawal in May 2020.[7] As the war in Libya subsided, Darfuri rebels, such as JEM and SLA-MM, among others, found renewed relevance in Sudan's political process through the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) (UN, 2020).

Meanwhile, CAR elections pushed the 2019 Khartoum Accord to a breaking point. On 19 December 2020, six armed-group signatories announced a new alliance, the Coalition des Patriotes pour le Changement (CPC). As CPC pressed towards Bangui, CAR, the Wagner Group's operation in CAR changed from a training to a military mission.[8] After a failed CPC attack on Bangui in January 2021, the Wagner Group, the Forces Armées Centrafricaines (FACA), and Rwandan bilateral forces launched a counter-offensive, bringing the CAR government and the Russian PMC close to the Darfur border.[9]

In southern Libya, the LNA's Brigade 128 began recruiting FACT fighters after a failed offensive. Brigade 128's commander, Hassan al-Zadma, saw FACT as critical to maintaining his influence in relation to the increasing influence of Haftar's son, Saddam Haftar. By early 2021, FACT was reportedly no longer receiving salaries from Khalifa Haftar's forces as his coalition weakened and priorities shifted. Sensing their weakening political position,

5 Author interview with a GNU officer in Tripoli, Libya, July 2022.

6 Author interview with a GNU commander in Tripoli, July 2022.

7 Author interview with a Wagner Group fighter, location withheld, September 2023.

8 Author interview with a Wagner Group commander in Bangui, CAR, February 2023.

9 In early 2023, the author was in Birao, CAR. Birao is approximately 65 km from the border with Darfur, Sudan, where the Wagner Group had set up a base.

FACT's commanders launched an offensive to take N'Djamena.[10] The attack failed. On 20 April 2021, however, Déby was mortally wounded on the front line, further reshaping the region's power balance. Overlapping wars revealed the limits of transactional alliances, which could unravel quickly as conditions and priorities shifted.

Sudan heads for war

In October 2021, Burhan seized power in a coup d'état, sparking widespread protests. As Darfur rebel leaders resisted disarmament, and RSF and SAF saw little advantage in reform, the JPA stalled (Craze and Khair, 2023).

By late 2022, tensions were brewing on Sudan's border with CAR, where CPC, Sudanese militias, Chadian rebel groups, independent mercenaries, and a new CAR group—Coalition Siriri—were mobilizing. On 29 December, a CAR government and Wagner Group delegation met with RSF near the border.[11] The presence of cross-border militias exposed limits to Hemeti's control over Darfur. Soon after, Hemeti 'closed' Sudan's border with CAR.

Hemeti's main concern was Coalition Siriri, an armed group led by CAR nationals and largely composed of Sudanese mercenaries. In November 2022, RSF arrested retired Major General Ahmed Abdel-Rahim Shukort Allah on charges of 'planning to carry out military action' in CAR (*Sudan Tribune*, 2022), allegedly in coordination with Coalition Siriri.[12]

Adding further uncertainty in Sudan, the Framework Agreement (Redress, 2022) between civilian representatives, Burhan, and Hemeti exposed cracks over RSF leadership and its integration into SAF. When Hemeti accused Burhan's men of fomenting rebellion in CAR, it signalled an escalation in RSF–SAF tensions. On 15 April 2023, conflict erupted between the two forces in Khartoum, reaching Darfur ten days later.

In the preceding months, Hemeti had recruited the arms trafficker Ahmet Djazouli to integrate the Ta'isha into RSF, part of a larger effort to create alliances with the Misseriya, Falata groups, and others. When war broke out, Djazouli moved his men into CAR[13] with assistance and weapons from the Wagner Group. On 25 May 2023, Djazouli crossed back into Darfur to support RSF in Nyala, Sudan.

When RSF failed to take Khartoum quickly, the UAE likely sought means to supply the paramilitary force. Chad was the natural choice; however, Hemeti's preferential treatment of Arab groups was a significant concern among the Zaghawa.

In June 2023, Mahamat Déby, or 'Kaka', flew to the UAE, where Abu Dhabi promised a USD 1.5 billion loan and military vehicles. In exchange, the Emiratis built a field hospital in Amdjaress, Chad, near the border with Darfur (Marchal, 2024). The hospital, however, was also a cover for the transport of military equipment and weapons to RSF (UNSC, 2024).

Fuel and ammunition also came through Saddam Haftar's networks, who was then the chief of staff of the LNA's ground forces. The Wagner Group's role in smuggling had diminished since leaving Birao, CAR, after Prigozhin's death in August 2023. While SAF's capture of greater Khartoum in May of 2025 put RSF on the defensive, the group has since regained ground, including the capture of SAF's last remaining base in Darfur, in the city of El Fasher, on 26 October 2025 (Rukanga and Wandera, 2025). To support this shift in momentum, the UAE recruited Colombian ex-soldiers to buttress RSF in Darfur (Barber and Rodríguez Álvarez, 2025). Furthermore, efforts have reportedly been underway to engage CAR's President Touadéra to diversify supply routes and reduce dependence on Chad.

10 Author interview with a source close to the events, location withheld, October 2024.

11 This fact is disputed by a source party to the delegation in Bangui, November 2023.

12 Author interview with a source in the Coalition Siriri, location withheld, November 2023.

13 Author interview with a source close to Djazouli in Bangui, November 2023.

Conclusion

External backing of RSF and other armed actors in the region reflects three broad trends in the outsourcing of warfare. First, the Russian Federation and western states are increasingly outsourcing security to PMCs and proxies to reduce the domestic economic and political costs of foreign intervention. Second, regional powers such as the UAE are adapting similar practices. Endowed with oil wealth and limited manpower, Abu Dhabi hires PMCs and proxies to open or maintain markets, in addition to countering real and perceived threats of jihadis and Islamist politics. Recent reports of Colombian mercenaries deployed to Darfur with Emirati backing highlight the globalized nature of this trend. Third, governments in fragile states continue to outsource the fight against rebels and armed groups to pro-government militias or outside intervenors—whether PMCs or bilateral forces.

Civil wars in CAR, Chad, Libya, and Sudan are rooted in the struggle over the distribution of power and resources between the centre and the periphery. Over time, the logic of war economies forges alliances that cross international borders and sectarian, ethnic, or religious divides. Repeated cycles of conflict generate a surplus of men whose ability to fight is a valued asset.

War and peace are profitable for those who command an armed force. Peace agreements function as the sites of price discovery, where commanders and security entrepreneurs negotiate their transactional value (De Waal, 2015). Darfur rebel groups profited from the war in Libya and 'peace' in Sudan. Today, Minni Minawi's forces, who lost credibility among civilian communities in Darfur during the JPA, are now repositioning themselves as the protector of those same communities against RSF violence, gaining political currency in relation to SAF in the process.

Pervasive fragility and transborder identities sustain a market for mercenaries. An enterprising commander can seek out an *umda* (chief) in north-eastern CAR or Darfur to request fighters,[14] with pricing dependent on whether those men are to be equipped with weapons. Negotiations then turn to the potential for looting, with discounts—typically between USD 300 and USD 400 per fighter—applied when such opportunities exist.

Along the Libya–Chad–Sudan border, greater wealth is at stake. Rebel groups can expect to receive salaries for their men and equipment when they sell their services. Larger states graft onto these local and regional networks, seeking to turn armed groups into proxies for their preferred geopolitical outcomes.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume intervenors can fully control these security entrepreneurs. Networks and regional actors, such as RSF, LNA, and the Wagner Group, as well as the UAE, cooperate when mutual interests align. Frustration, however, abounds when they do not. In some cases, these same paramilitary forces have turned against the governments that either created or sponsored them. For now, men like Khalifa Haftar and Hemeti only seek to capture or reshape power within the government. They do not seek to overthrow the nation-state.

That raises the question of what is truly new about these militias and paramilitaries, whose power today rivals that of nation-states. In practice, militia and paramilitary rule have long existed. What has changed is the increased scale and scope of military and economic resources that non-state actors now wield.

The resurgence of mercenary economies and transactional alliances across CAR, Chad, Libya, and Sudan exposes the limits of state-centric peacebuilding. Approaches that privilege elite bargains or military integration risk perpetuating the very market logic that sustains armed groups. A more durable path lies in constraining the cross-border financing and logistics networks that empower them, while reinvesting in civilian governance and responsible arms control at the local level. In the end, peace in Sudan will depend less on disarming non-state armed groups and government-aligned militias than on dismantling the war economies that keep them in business.

14 Author interview with a source close to the events, location withheld, June 2024.

Acronyms and abbreviations

CAR	Central African Republic
CPC	Coalition des Patriotes pour le Changement (Coalition of Patriots for Change)
FACT	Le Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (The Front for Change and Concord in Chad)
GNU	Government of National Unity
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IS	Islamic State
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement
JPA	Juba Peace Agreement
LNA	Libyan National Army
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PMC	Private military company
RFC	Rassemblement des Forces pour le Changement (Rally of Forces for Change)
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SLA-AW	Sudan Liberation Army led by Abdul Wahid al Nur
SLA-MM	Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minawi
SLM/A	Sudan Liberation Movement/Army
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UFDD	Union des Forces pour la Démocratie et le Développement (Union of Forces for Democracy and Development)
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar

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Layout: Rick Jones
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Contact details

Small Arms Survey, Maison de la Paix, Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

t +41 22 908 5777, **e** info@smallarmssurvey.org

www.smallarmssurvey.org