

Sudan's pivot to Iran: the Red Sea drone arms race and Africa expansion



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INTRODUCTION

As Iran's influence continues to grow in the Red Sea, particularly through strategic alliances such as the one forged with Sudan, this report examines the shifting geopolitical dynamics in the surrounding region.¹ There is a focus on the consequential deployment of Iranian-made weaponry, and the competition between various nations that are having a regional impact.

Sudan's diplomatic maneuvers have taken a notable turn with the decision to restore ties with Iran.² This shift is underscored by the arrival of Iranian cargo planes in Port Sudan, a stronghold controlled by Sudan's military-led government, headed by Abdel Fatah Al-Burhan, the leader of the Sudan Armed Forces, or SAF.³⁻⁴

Amid escalating tensions in the region — including US airstrikes in response to actions by Iran-backed militia — there have been

reports of Sudan's paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, or RSF, led by Mohamed Hamden Dagalo, known as Hemedti, recently intercepting an Iranian drone operated by the SAF.

The sudden involvement of Iran in the civil war that erupted on April 15, 2023, by supporting the SAF against a paramilitary group which the SAF accuses of being backed by the UAE, amplifies challenges for the North African nation which is already grappling with the threat of famine.⁵

Against this background, the strategic importance of Sudan's 643-km Red Sea coastline comes to the forefront, with global powers such as China,⁶⁻⁷ Russia⁸⁻⁹ and Turkiye¹⁰ vying for access and influence.

Iranian-made armed drones have enabled the Sudanese army to halt the progress of the rival paramilitary RSF and regain territory around the capital, according to a senior army source and multiple other sources.¹¹ These drones, reportedly acquired over the past few months, have proven more effective than



The Islamist movement's ascent in Sudan cast a profound shadow on the country's direction



previous unmanned aerial vehicles used by the SAF. Eyewitnesses report the drones' precision in monitoring the movements and targeting the positions of RSF personnel, contributing to recent territorial advances, notably in Omdurman and other areas.

Despite denials from Sudanese and Iranian officials regarding the direct procurement of weapons from Iran, evidence suggests otherwise. Satellite imagery, flight-tracking records, and eyewitness testimonies indicate a significant influx of Iranian drones into the country, transported on aircraft operated by Iranian cargo carrier Qeshm Fars Air. The RSF has acknowledged the receipt of Iranian drones and other weaponry, underscoring Tehran's backing for Sudan's army in the conflict.¹²

However, sourcing weapons from Iran could complicate relations for the Sudanese military with the US, which is leading negotiation efforts between the warring parties. US officials have expressed concern

**UNICEF and NGO
Premiere Urgence
personnel prepare
aid kits for Sudanese
refugees from the
Tandelti area, who have
sought refuge in Chad's
Koufroun region amidst
escalating conflict
between army forces
and paramilitaries. AFP**

over what they view as external involvement in the conflict and its potential to exacerbate regional instability.¹³

THE DRONE DILEMMA

Sudan is not new to the use of military drones. As early as 2008, Iran was reportedly providing military equipment to Khartoum for its operations in Darfur, which if true, is a direct violation of the UN arms embargo.¹⁴

In addition, in 2009 Israel reportedly deployed drones over Sudan's territory, attacking a weapons convoy in the Sudanese desert that was allegedly bound for Gaza, killing more than 100 people. Iranian arms were believed to be shipped to Hamas agents in Sudan, who were then supposed to make the long journey through Egypt and Sinai to the Gaza Strip.¹⁵

Then, in 2011, an Israeli drone reportedly struck a Hezbollah convoy, killing Abdel Latif Al-Ashkar, the alleged head of arms smuggling for Hamas.¹⁶

“The longstanding ties between Sudan and



Iran became even more evident when Sudan deployed Iran-supplied unarmed Ababil drones in 2013 to assist in guiding artillery fire against armed groups,” Wim Zwijnenburg, a disarmament project leader for Dutch peace organization PAX, told Arab News.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s Arms Transfers Database, Iran delivered five Ababil-3 drones from 2007-2008.¹⁷ This, added Zwijnenburg, “demonstrated the growing interest in drones by the Sudanese military, though with limited evidence of them actually being used.”

In addition, according to reports, satellite images from Jan. 9, 2024, confirm the presence of Iran’s Mohajer-6 drone at Sudan’s Wadi Sayyidna air base. Manufactured by Quds Air Industries, this single-engine unmanned aircraft, equipped with precision-guided munitions, bolsters Iran’s military influence in the Middle East.¹⁸

Recent footage of a Mohajer-6 shootdown¹⁹ suggests limited immediate impact on the ongoing conflict. However, the significance of drones in warfare, particularly for intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance, or ISTAR, “poses risks to civilians and urban

US military readies to aid American citizens fleeing war-torn Sudan, assisting them in boarding an evacuation vessel in Port Sudan. With daily life increasingly untenable for civilians, foreign nations have scrambled to evacuate their nationals. AFP

infrastructure,” Zwijnenburg stated.

While the Mohajer-6’s precision-bombing capability has the potential to strengthen the army’s offensive in Omdurman, the challenges faced by the SAF go beyond equipment, and encompass personnel, leadership, logistics and tactics. Although Iran’s support could have an impact, it might not shift the course of the war immediately and decisively, but its influence could grow more substantial over time, depending on the extent of assistance.

Nevertheless, the Mohajer-6’s capabilities, including air-to-surface and electronic attacks, reflect Iran’s expanding drone program, raising concerns about its role in densely populated areas. The US alleges Iran is supplying similar drones to various groups in the region, underscoring the broader implications of drone deployment in modern conflicts.²⁰ As both the SAF and the RSF acknowledge the strategic importance of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance provided by drones, and with other suppliers lining up, more is to come in terms of an arms race. While the SAF has utilized the Ababil-3 and Mohajer-6 drones, supplemented by armed, commercial first-person view drones with alleged Ukrainian support, the RSF



Iran military showcases the "Mohajer 6" drone in an exhibition in Tehran. The domestically developed UAV, boasting advanced weaponry, was seen at the SAF-controlled Wadi Sayyidna air base. AFP

reportedly operates large armed quadcopter drones capable of dropping mortar rounds.

As a result of the deployment of the drones, the RSF has been facing serious pushbacks, yet at this stage it is difficult to judge whether these weapons are going to change the course of the war.

Zwijnenburg said: "In the overall picture, the number of drones currently known to be used seems too small to make a meaningful difference at the moment, but it signals the growing importance of unmanned systems in warfare."

He added: "If the numbers increase, accompanied with training and a sound military strategy, they could be decisive in the fight." Several states with drone capabilities "have expressed interest to support their allies in Sudan with armed drones."

ENDURING ALLIANCE

The historical connections between Iran and Sudan, particularly in the context of the so-called Islamist movement, can be traced back several decades, marked by shared ideological affinities and geopolitical considerations. The relationship gained momentum in 1989 when Sudan underwent a significant political

transformation with the ascent of President Omar Al-Bashir in an Islamist-backed coup.²¹

During the 1980s, both Iran and Sudan were navigating complex regional dynamics, facing opposition from Western powers, and seeking to assert their influence in the Islamic world. This laid the foundation for collaboration, as both nations aimed to challenge the existing geopolitical order. The ideological alignment between the Iranian revolution and Sudan's newly established Islamist government became a driving force in fostering bilateral ties.

The Islamist movement in Sudan, led by figures including Hassan Al-Turabi, found common cause with Iran's revolutionary ideals. Al-Turabi, a prominent Sudanese-Islamist ideologue, played a key role in shaping Sudan's political landscape and forging ties with Iran. Throughout the 1990s, these connections deepened, leading to collaborations in various spheres, including military cooperation and intelligence sharing.²²

One notable event in this historical trajectory was the visit by Iran's President Ali Rafsanjani to Sudan in 1991. During this visit, agreements were signed to finance significant arms purchases from China, amounting

to \$300 million, symbolizing a strategic partnership that sought to counterbalance the withdrawal of US military assistance following Al-Bashir's rise to power in 1989.

Sudan's cooperation with Iran therefore goes well beyond the supply of drones.

Jerry Canto, an analyst at United Against Nuclear Iran, a non-profit organization based in the US, told Arab News that "in 1994, reports suggested that the IRGC-Quds Force (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) was deployed to Sudan to train insurgents undermining Western-aligned governments in Africa and the Middle East. Sudan then cultivated relations with Iran-backed groups like Hamas, allowing its territory for weapons transshipment to Gaza and hosting a production hub at the Yarmouk Factory, bombed in a presumed Israeli strike in 2012."

During the 2000s, despite a UN arms embargo in force on Sudan from 2004, Iran, along with China and Russia, became a leading arms supplier to Al-Bashir's government.²³ In the early-to-mid 2010s, Iran docked naval assets at Sudan's Red Sea ports, demonstrating a strengthening of ties. However, this period was also marked by reported Israeli airstrikes in Sudan targeting the operatives of the IRGC and weapons factories, showcasing the geopolitical complexities in the region.²⁴

ECLIPSE AND RISE OF 'POLITICAL ISLAM'

The Islamist movement's ascent in Sudan cast a profound shadow on the country's direction, intertwining the nation's fate with that of an ideologically aligned Iran.²⁵

As this relationship has evolved, it was marked by the deployment of Iran's IRGC to Sudan in the mid-1990s. Reports reveal a covert dance between the two nations, with IRGC-Quds Force operatives aiding insurgents trying to destabilize Western-aligned governments in Africa and the Middle East. Yet over time fractures emerged, including in 2016 Sudan's decision to sever diplomatic ties with Iran amid regional tensions, notably the upheaval surrounding the assault on the Saudi Arabia Embassy in Tehran.²⁶

Subsequently, Sudan appeared to distance itself even more from Iran. In January 2021, under the transitional civilian government, Sudan initially showed support for the

Abraham Accords, a move seen as a nod toward normalization with Israel, embraced by both Al-Burhan, the leader of the SAF, and Hemedti, the leader of the paramilitary RSF.²⁷

However, the October 2021 coup, orchestrated by both generals, reversed these gains. The coup government reinstated Islamists, and paramilitary groups with Islamist affiliations resurfaced, exacerbating the influence of what has been labelled as political Islam within Sudan's armed forces and government.²⁸

Then, internal conflict erupted in mid-April 2023 between the RSF and the SAF. As a result, the SAF accused the RSF of being backed by the UAE, leading to a deterioration of relations between the two countries. This pushed the SAF into closer cooperation with Iran, granting Tehran a strategic foothold in the Red Sea region. Consequently, previous efforts against political Islam in Sudan have been disrupted, marking a significant shift in regional dynamics. The SAF restored bilateral relations with Iran in October 2023.²⁹

In the meantime, Hemedti expressed regret for his role in the coup, labeling it a "trap" orchestrated by Al-Burhan to revive Islamists.³⁰ The conflict has indeed empowered and reinforced Islamist elements within Sudan's armed forces and government. Previously dormant paramilitary groups with Islamist affiliations, such as the Al-Bara bin Malik Brigade and the reconstituted Special Operations Unit, have resurfaced to support the Sudanese armed forces in the ongoing conflict.³¹

In another development, Sudan's Foreign Minister Ali Al-Sadiq held discussions with Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber on Jan. 20 during the Summit of Non-Aligned States in Kampala. During that event, Mokhber expressed "regret over the recent unrest and conflict in Sudan," attributing it to foreign intervention, including that of "the Zionist occupying regime."

He also reiterated Iran's "support for the Sudanese people and their legitimate government," specifically referring to Sudan's ruling military junta.³²

Currently, the ideological differences deepened by Sudan's internal conflict, which has devastated the country and left millions displaced,³³ have created fertile ground for an even closer collaboration between the



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Islamists. Many groups within Sudan that have historically felt marginalized now vie for influence in the new reality, preparing for a post-war Sudan. This is exemplified not just by the resurgent influence of Islamist leaders on the SAF but also by the developments involving the Beja tribes, further complicating Sudan's political scene, which is heavily influenced by tribal dynamics.³⁴

THE AFRICA EXPANSION

Sudan, reportedly used historically as a conduit for weapons to proxies in the Red Sea and Gaza,³⁵ poses challenges for monitoring and control. Drawing parallels with Iran's strategy in supplying the Houthis through Somalia, where weapons are disassembled and transported on small, elusive boats, the situation in Sudan remains opaque. The lack of clarity on military activities in Sudan amplifies the risk of enhancing Iran's damaging capabilities, further complicating the regional security landscape.

The growing influence of Iran in the Red Sea region therefore prompts questions about its impact on US interests, alliances and strategic considerations. The potential consequences for regional stability also depend heavily on Iran's decisions.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei speaking during a ceremony in Tehran. Under his guidance, Iran has sought to expand its influence in East Africa and the Red Sea region. AFP

Sargis Sangari, the CEO of the Near East Center for Strategic Engagement, an academic think tank based in the US, emphasizes that Sudan, previously the largest country by area in Africa and the Arab League until the secession of South Sudan in 2011, remains strategically positioned for external powers.

For this reason, "whoever controls Sudan can significantly impact East Africa and the entire African continent," Sangari states, adding that Iran's ambitions in Africa are linked to its broader goal of establishing itself as the leader of Islam, challenging regional powers including Saudi Arabia, Turkiye and Egypt.

China's role is becoming more evident in this context. Sangari argues that the country can now leverage its relationship with Iran to extend its influence globally and counter the US. Consequently, the China-Iran alliance presents challenges to traditional power structures in the Middle East.

"If the current trajectory continues, Iran could become the leader of the Islamic world, especially if it acquires a nuclear weapon, and this geopolitical shift might marginalize other regional players," he added.

FOOTNOTES

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