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Sudan's Militarized Conflict

Security in Context

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Interview about the armed conflict between SAF and RSF, examining the roots and dynamics of the war

It has been almost 2 weeks since the armed conflict between the SAF and the RSF began. As a result, hundreds of people have been killed, thousands have been injured and the conversation about Sudan's democratic transition has evolve to focus on preventing another civil war.

Today we are joined by Hamid Khalafallah, a development practitioner, researcher, and policy analyst based in Khartoum-Sudan. Hamid works as a program officer for the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance in Sudan and a nonresident fellow with the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy in the United States.

Hello Hamid, welcome to Security in Context, how are you today?

Hamid:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm safe and at home in Khartoum where fighting is happening all around and currently experiencing power outage, it's 40 degrees Celsius, so, it's quite hot, but otherwise, doing well.

Anita Fuentes:

It's pretty hot in Spain as well, climate change is terrible these days. Anyway, not to go on to talk about a different problem, right? But to start: could you give us a brief update on the most important developments that have taken place in Sudan over the past week?

Hamid:

Absolutely, so since the conflict erupted almost 2 weeks ago, there have been multiple initiatives to mediate and to try to at least establish a cease fire, and then, you know start discussions about: let us go to talks, and try to resolve this conflict politically and so on, however every single cease fire that was announced was not honored by both parties, the latest one was announced the day before yesterday and it was a US

sponsored cease fire, Antony Blinken the US secretary of state announced it and mentioned that he is been brokering between the two generals: the leader of the SAF, and the leader of the RSF forces paramilitary, and they both committed to it, however, just in the few hours- the few hours after the announcement they broke it, and it continue to get violated until few minutes ago I could still hear a gunfire nearby my residence, so I think, yeah, this is the biggest update, Is that the war is continuing but, not only that its continuing, is that both leaders does not seem to be ready yet to commit to a ceasefire, or to end the war soon in any way.

Anita Fuentes:

I'm so sorry that this is happening, the uprising of the Sudanese people and the mass protests that took place in 2018 and 2019 inspired the region, and inspired the world, particularly because of the popular movement insistence on nonviolence. They succeeded in gaining a number of important victories including the push for civilian rule or at least a share in government. So, could you explain to our viewers the impact of that popular movement and what has happened since then that led to these events that we see today?

Hamid:

So, obviously the popular movement that started in December 2018 and continued throughout the past 4 years nonstop, even when we were in a relatively peaceful and democratic era, if you like, when there was a civilian transitional government between September 2019 and October 2021, the popular movement still continued to be very active, mobilizing people and advocating for the demands and so on. And after the coup, also orchestrated by the two generals that are currently fighting each other- that took place in October 2021 the popular movement was always there on the front lines, on the streets demanding for the return to the civilian democratic transition and so on, so, it has always been very active and obviously their work, and their very big role change the rules of the game in Sudan, and it changed the way things are working, and that upset a lot of the old powers that were trying to find their way back to power like the former regime of Omer Albashir, that was overthrown by the revolution, and also a lot of people within the army who have ambitions or think that army should be in control, and the army should be in power, and the RSF paramilitary leader, who is essentially building his way to presidency, he has always had that aspiration, and so on. So, the role of the resistance committees or the popular resistance movement in general has threatened the interests and the privileges of these people directly. And this is now why we see them carrying out a full-on war fighting against each other over power, but by extension they are trying to say to the resistance democratic movement

that you will not have a future in Sudan- one of us military leaders will win and we will be, you know, in charge of everything.

Anita Fuentes:

What are the Sudanese civil society groups calling for? like what are the main demands that are being raised internally, and, also to the international community?

Hamid:

So, basically there are few things that people are focusing on now, the first thing is to end this war immediately that is the first demand, and there is a popular campaign you know, around this with slogans along the line of No-to-War and so on, which are all focusing on end the war immediately. Because we cannot afford an extra minute in this war, it claims the lives in average- and people's lives should never be reduced to numbers, but statistics help us in kind of seeing the impact, so on a daily basis we lose in average about 50 people to this war. Now it's been 12 days, and you know, we know that at least 460 people were killed and that's you know, a very tiny representation of the actual magnitude of things. I'm sure there are so many people who are killed but not accounted for, because when you drive around Khartoum particularly in the main streets where fighting is happening, you would see bodies of people thrown on the sides, no one is able to take them, to bury them or to take them to a morgue, it's a horrific situation. So people are calling for, to end this war immediately, and then for the flow of humanitarian assistance to reach people who are currently suffering a multifaceted crisis because of the war, because of economic situation because of the power outages, of water outages, lack of you know, shortage in cash flow with banks being closed and telecom networks falling apart and no access to mobile money or mobile banking apps and so on. So people are literally locked in their houses with no electricity you know, no water, no food supplies, and no money and obviously very few – very little chance to leave the house to seek help or so on because of the security situation outside. So, getting humanitarian assistance to flow to these people suffering is also a priority. Then the 3rd thing is to get back to the political process that would take Sudan out of this bottleneck and so on. And that would obviously an important part of that political process when the time is right, because now a-days there is no way to discuss political process in the middle of war, but when the time is right a huge part would be putting an end to obviously military or militaries multiple intervention in politics and in governance in Sudan.

Anita Fuentes:

That all is horrifying, but aside from everything you have been describing, and the death toll, what is the economic and humanitarian impact of the recent events?

Hamid:

It has been, what we are living currently, is a full-on humanitarian crisis in all aspects and so on. Obviously like I said there have been in terms of services, there have been a huge problems in providing water and electricity to people because most neighborhoods have been suffering of outages of these services since the war erupted back in April 15th, so it has been quite difficult for people but also there is huge crisis in terms of food supplies, food supplies are running out. Sudan largely depends on importing food supplies that is not obviously happening agriculture and you know, vegetables and fruits and so on are not reaching people because of the war and stores around are mostly closed any way. So, people are really running out of food supplies, and would you know, eventually if this is not solved, some people might have to starve to death. and then there is the medical care situation over 50% of the hospitals in Khartoum the capital city where the health care is quite centralized as development in Sudan in general is very centralized, Khartoum had most of the development, and the rest got just tiny pieces. So most of the health care is centralized in Khartoum and over 50% of that is out of service now either because hospitals were bombed, or because the hospitals are in very risky areas where neither medical personnel, nor patients could reach, or because they have no power, or water at the moment to run the hospital, so operations are impossible, so, functioning with around 40 % and even that 40 % is still experiencing severe shortages in terms of their staff, in terms of medical supplies and citizens also like finding it very difficult to reach these hospitals. So, there is a huge health care crisis also happening at the same time because most of the health care providers or hospitals or so on are located in very critical areas that are so close to either the military headquarters or to the presidential palace or so on, where most of the fighting is focused, so it is impossible to reach there. And then there are also people trapped in their houses in these critical areas who are un able to leave, and no one is able to rescue them from inside their houses, so they left to live with whatever they have already had in their houses 12 days ago.

Anita Fuentes:

Well, I wanted to ask you also zooming out a little bit, because there are a lot of discussions about the role of regional and international actors such as: Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and other countries, so, could you explain the role of international powers and do you think it's a simplification to call this a proxy war as some you know, media outlets have referred to it?

Hamid:

I think it's certainly a simplification and a reduction to the size of the problem, but also its one of these, you know, western centric approaches that different media outlets tend to use or different western governments tend to use, where you know, all problems happening in the global south are happening because something is happening on the global north or so on. So, all, of a sudden the whole problem of Sudan its now reduced to being you know, a proxy role for Russia or so because everyone is currently upset at Russia and so on which is, it is one of the factors. The actors, fighting do have connection with Russia. Russia has been supporting them in so many ways, but this is not why they are essentially fighting, there are so many reasons, that are local, and that are Sudanese you know, based on the Sudanese context, they are fighting overpower in Sudan. But that being said, and how there are so many localized and complex reasons for this war, there is this regional dimension. so, the RSF have been helping the UAE out during the war in Yemen, and they have built very strong connections with them, they have benefited of that war financially fighting for UAE in Yemen, and so on and that is you know, one of their biggest regional allies. Then they have also connections with Russia, and they have also connections with Israel who have been supporting them, as all these actors have been supporting them as a paramilitary by selling them weapons or providing them with money. On the other hand, the SAF have very close connections with the Egyptian army and Egyptian regime and have been receiving unlimited support from them also. And that is also one of the complications of what's going on and they also have connections with the Israeli government a different fraction within the government, and so both those actors who are currently fighting have these regional you know extensions. but I think it's wrong to over simplify the whole problem to these regional kind of linkages and so on, but in the same time it is important for the international community to capitalize on these regional linkages and use that leverage to exert pressure on both fighting armies or fighting militaries to end this fight right now, by using, you know, pressure exerted through these regional and transnational linkages.

Anita Fuentes:

In a recent tweet you state that: "pushing for safe passages to evacuate internationals without simultaneously pushing to end the war will be terrible". Is there a generalized perception among the Sudanese people that they are being left behind by regional and international actors?

Hamid:

Well, yes, obviously regional and international actors you know arguably played a huge role in the current context that we are currently living. Ever since the revolution happened and so on, we could you know, its I think easy to say that international actors have been pushing for this partnership with the military and suggesting that it is better for the civilians to work with the military you know because Sudan is fragile and the security situation ...etc. So that kind of partnership between the civilians and the military which we could say to some extend you know, led us to the current context that we are living in, and so on, was in so many ways brokered by the international community, so, it's just a bit disgraceful, let me say to just pack and leave and not look behind when you were part of the people who created the current problem and so on. I obviously appreciate the importance, and the urgency of evacuating, you know diplomatic staff and take them to safety because you know if they remain, they will obviously become target, and they will become part of the game that is now being played as part of this war. So, it is important to evacuate them that is not, I do not deny that but I think the same leverage that the international community had to secure safe passages to evacuate the international, or foreign diplomats and so on, they could have use that leverage at the same time, to at least secure safe passages for instance, for humanitarian assistance because they have successfully been able to secure safe passages for people to flee the country to get evacuated. Planes have been coming down, and like landing and taking off, yesterday, today, tomorrow like as a result all day around the clock, and still happening now. Yet, no one can provide any humanitarian assistance and that's makes you wonder you know, what were the priorities of the international community when they negotiated safe passages for evacuating diplomatic staff.

Anita Fuentes:

I want to end up with- because what you were mentioning before about the global south constantly being ignored, or the conflicts on the global south being framed in terms of the global north usually, I want to end up with a question about how this conflict is been covered globally? Because I have recently saw an Instagram posted by Khalid Baidoon which said: You know 200 Sudanese civilians were killed this past week, as violence between rival factions intensified this has received minimal coverage, if Sudan were in Europe this would be global news, but the context says Africa, and the victims are: 1. Black. 2. Muslims, 3. Tied to a region stereotyped as violent and uncivilized, unlike Ukraine. Not to frame this in terms of, or compare it to the conflict in Ukraine that's been happening you know, for over a year, but what is your perception of how this is being covered globally?

Hamid:

I think its... we have been seeing this over and over again you know these hashtags that you would see, or captions that you often see on social media 'not surprised but still disappointed' so I think that's kind of frames how I feel, not surprised but still disappointed. we have been seeing this happening over and over again where the global north or western governments or even western nations- also sadly in many cases, would, you know even when they know about the conflict going on in Sudan or anywhere on the global south, there is an assumption that you know, it's less big of a problem, it's not a huge problem, because you know these people are used to it, they are used to wars, they are used to having tough times, they are used you know, suffering and so on, so it's not a huge problem. But if this happens on the global north people here are not used to it, so it's a big problem, and we need to support these people and so on. I get that you know, it's often ..it's sad, but it happens, it's often easier to sympathize with those closer to you in terms of proximity and so on. But I think it's kind of, does not take into account all the transnational dimensions of conflicts, that we are living, like I said the kind of conflict that we are living is very deeply rooted in the Sudanese context and so on but it has regional dimensions, international actors have played roles in it, but also if this war continues it will go, it will spread all over the region, if it is spreading all over the region would have an impact on Europe or on other continents and so on, so every conflict that happens anywhere is very much transnational, and I think people should view it in that way, but I also hope a day would come where human being's life is equal everywhere, regardless of their you know race, or nationality, or where they live, or so on, but I think yes, that is still the case. the conflict in Sudan is not getting enough coverage that it should get given the magnitude that I can see right now, and I don't think it will get it, but yeah, it's sad but we have been seeing this over, and over again.

Anita Fuentes:

Yeah, and I think it's kind of a vicious circle where you know, the more something that's covered the more people empathize with it and the more people, you know, know about something the more you have feelings about it. So, it is very important that you know, news globally covers this conflict just as much as they cover any conflict that they consider to be you know, closer in terms of geographic proximity. Before we wrap up, is there anything you would like to add, or that we haven't covered yet?

Hamid:

Yeah, I think one important aspect that I would you know, think we should all focus on like I said, the priority now is to end the war, and if there are any policy makers who are hearing this, or if there are any people close to policy makers, or planning to do anything about Sudan: yes, the priority to end the war, and everything, but I think part of why we are here now is that you know, so many people in Sudan, but also this is in my opinion an imported a kind of notion that western governments have tried to impose on us in so many ways I think that's it had been a new colonial kind of approach, where Sudanese people, by extension people in Africa, or people in the global south are always asked to a kind of tone down their aspirations for democracy, and to focus on you know security and stability in countries, or continents and so on, and you shouldn't be too ambitious in terms of asking for democracy and so on. And I really worry that after this war that narrative would become even stronger. That in Sudan let us not talk about the democratic transition let us just end the war and you know focus about peace building and so on and that would obviously allow another authoritarian regime to come and govern Sudan for God knows how long and so on, so, I think it's important that as we focus on ending the war agenda is that we shouldn't compromise the democracy security nexus, and kind of only focus on security at the expense of democracy, we need to kind of to push for. yes, we want security, we want peace in Sudan, but we also want democracy all together. And I think you know after a 4-year revolution, and people being out on the streets every day asking for democracy, I think they have earned that right, to ask for democracy, to be treated as important as security and peace.

Anita Fuentes:

Hamid thank you very much for joining us. We hope that things get better soon and that not only the ends of the war, but also the conversation about democracy continues until it's a goal that's get achieved. Thank you so much.

Hamid:

Thank you so much for having me.