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Sheikh Musa Hilal backs SAF in power tussle: maneuver or competition?

Atar Network

In a significant turn of events, Sheikh Musa Hilal, a figure often mired in controversy, has declared his support for the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in their conflict with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). This announcement came during a gathering in Mustariha, North Darfur, where tensions have been high since April 2023.

Musa Hilal, who leads the Revolutionary Awakening Council (RAC), is a member of the Al-Mahameed clan of the Rizeigat Arab tribe, a group with a strong presence in western Sudan. His counterpart in the RSF, General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as "Hemeti," belongs to the Mahariya clan of the same tribe.

Hilal's rise to prominence dates back to the 2003 Darfur war, where he led the Border Guard Forces, composed mainly of Arab tribesmen, in support of the SAF and then-President Omar al-Bashir's regime. They scored significant victories against the Darfuri armed movements, driving them from key areas in the region.

Despite his popularity and pastoral roots, Hilal's shifting allegiances and frequent disputes with other leaders have kept him in the public eye. His actions during the Darfur conflict led to severe allegations, culminating in a 2006 United Nations sanction that included travel bans and asset freezes.

After being appointed as an advisor to the Ministry of Federal Governance in 2008, Hilal grew dissatisfied, viewing the role as symbolic and lacking influence. He criticized the government for neglecting the Arab militias that had been instrumental in the war effort, leading to his return to Mustariha and subsequent vocal opposition to al-Bashir's administration.

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For its part, al-Bashir government, seeking international approval and distancing itself from the militia's atrocities in the Darfur war, disbanded the Border Guard Forces but tried to placate Hilal with an advisory role.

The government's response to Hilal's growing clout was to establish the RSF in 2013, with Hemeti at the helm, exploiting existing intra-Rizeigat clan rivalries. Post-Bashir's 2015 election victory, the government's actions in Darfur, including integrating the Border Guard Forces into the RSF, were seen as moves to limit Hilal's power.

Musa Hilal		Hemeti
Established the Border Guard Forces	2007	Fought in the Darfur war with the Border Guard Forces
Seized control of Jebel Amer, amassing significant wealth from gold	2013	Founded the RSF, attached to the National Intelligence and Security Service
Rejected the government's reconciliation plan, launched his own campaign	2014	Returned to Darfur after fighting with the intelligence service in South Kordofan
Advanced his political ambitions via the RAC	2016	Became RSF commander under a new government law
Opposed the disarmament campaign, arrested in Khartoum	2017	Led the civilian disarmament campaign

Hilal's disillusionment with the SAF, after years of collaboration, was exacerbated by a disarmament campaign targeting vehicles and motorcycles, which he staunchly opposed. His capture by the RSF in 2017 and subsequent imprisonment until the 2019 uprising marked a low point in his relationship with the government.

A presidential decree later reversed the integration of the Border Guard Forces into the RSF, reinstating them under the SAF. This shift occurred a week after the outbreak of war in April 2023.

The transitional period saw Rizeigat leaders pressuring for Hilal's release, which was eventually secured through an agreement with Hemeti's brother, General Abdel Rahim Dagalo. However, the terms of this agreement led to rifts within the RAC and some members defecting to the RSF.

In early February of this year, an Arab tribal leaders' delegation from the five Darfur states met Hilal. The meeting attended by high-ranking RSF officers, including Major General Giddo Abenshok, RSF commander for North Darfur, and Major General Ali Yaqoub, RSF commander for Central Darfur, who sanctioned by USA administration on mid-last week.

Sources told Atar Network that the meeting which prompted by RSF leadership, agreed to return seized Hilal's assets and for him not to opposing the RSF.

However, an alleged assassination attempt on Hilal in April has raised ten-

sions. Hilal's call for accountability from Awlad Rashid tribe, to which the suspect belongs, resulted in a public declaration of support for the SAF against militias.

This stance has caused a rift within Arab tribes, particularly the Al-Mahameed, whose leaders have publicly distanced themselves from Hilal, emphasising their allegiance to the RSF and criticizing the SAF's actions.

The evolving alliance between the RAC and the SAF, including a military supply drop by the Sudanese Air Force, indicates a rapid shift in dynamics. The historical pattern of alliances and conflicts in the region continues, with the balance of power remaining as fluid as ever.

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