

The year 2013 marked a significant downturn for Sudan's National Salvation (Inqaz) Government, which was already reeling from the loss of 80 per cent of its state budget following losing oil with South Sudan's secession in 2011. Meanwhile, the Middle East and Arab world were engulfed in revolutions and turmoil, with countries like Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia facing significant setbacks. In this chaotic environment, the UAE emerged as a key financial player, perpetually in need of hired fighters.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia capitalized on this need, transporting thousands of Sudanese to the Yemen front under the banner of "Operation Decisive Storm". As the National Inqaz Government underwent structural changes after 2014, increasingly relying on individuals rather than institutions, the UAE seized the opportunity to recruit fighters from former President Omar al-Bashir. This recruitment provided Mohammed Hamdan Dagher (Hemeti) and his family with access to vast resources, significantly expanding the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and integrating them into the UAE's military strategy.

Ground Policies

Between 2012 and 2022, the UAE invested approximately [\\$60 billion](#) across Africa, establishing itself as a significant economic player on the continent. By 2022, the UAE had doubled this figure, committing [\\$52.8 billion](#) in direct proj-

By 2018, the Abu Dhabi Development Fund had invested about 7.3 billion dirhams in Sudan, primarily through deposits within the framework of deals established by the Sudanese regime.

ects and investments. This made the UAE the leading source of foreign direct investment in Africa, surpassing China's contributions by a wide margin. However, in 2023, UAE investments decreased to around \$44 billion.

Sudan remained a part of the UAE's broader African ambitions. By 2018, the Abu Dhabi Development Fund had invested about 7.3 billion dirhams in Sudan, primarily through deposits within the framework of deals established by the Sudanese regime.

DP World, a major UAE entity, secured its first African port acquisition in the early 2010s. By 2022, it had purchased South Africa's "[Imperial Logistics](#)" for approximately \$1 billion, allowing it to expand its reach across the continent. Additionally, the UAE signed a 30-year lease with Tanzania to manage the [Dar es Salaam port](#) and acquired agricultural land in Zimbabwe, Sudan and Angola, with Dubai Investments and E20 holding around 3,800 hectares.

The UAE aimed to control major agricultural projects in Sudan, and since the transitional period, its policies have increasingly sought to influence key players and state institutions. The Al-Dahra Agricultural Holding Company, for instance, secured the Wadi Al-Hawad project, awarded by the Transitional Sovereign Council. In 2021, Lt Gen Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the Sovereign Council, established a committee to evaluate the project. By 2022, the committee's recommendations led [Al-Dahra](#) to secure approximately 3 million feddan with an initial investment of about \$1 billion, projected to reach around \$10 billion by the end of the first phase.

The Dispute Between the SAF and the UAE

The underlying conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the RSF is fundamentally economic, centered on their relationship and trade dynamics. The military confrontation with Ethiopia in the Al-Fashaga region is a prime example. On September 6, 2020, the SAF attempted to reclaim Al-Fashaga, which had been occupied by Ethiopia since 1991, taking advantage of Ethiopia's preoccupation with its internal conflict against the Tigray forces.

During this time, Hemeti offered no support to the SAF, neither logistically nor in terms of combat units, despite his interest in the Eastern Sudan file. Notably, Hemeti visited Addis Ababa during

the military confrontation, where he was received by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and toured economic sites with his younger brother, Al-Goni Hamdan Hemeti, who manages the economic portfolio for the Hemeti family.

Hemeti did not directly intervene in the Al-Fashaga issue, except by supporting a UAE initiative to resolve it. This [proposal](#) suggested that the SAF withdraw to pre-September 2020 borders, with the UAE investing in Al-Fashaga's land, distributing returns as 40 per cent to Sudan, 40 per cent to Ethiopia, and 20 per cent to the UAE.

The Al-Fashaga issue marked a turning point in the relationship between the SAF and the RSF. [Lt. Gen. Kabbashi](#) rejected the UAE proposal, stating publicly after Eid al-Adha 2021 prayers that anyone who does not recognize Sudanese sovereignty over the land should leave the country, asserting that there would be no concessions on Al-Fashaga. Various

The UAE proposal suggested that the SAF withdraw to pre-September 2020 borders, with the UAE investing in Al-Fashaga's land, distributing returns as 40 per cent to Sudan, 40 per cent to Ethiopia, and 20 per cent to the UAE.

groups in Al-Gadarif, where Al-Fashaga is located, adopted the slogan “This Land is Ours,” echoing Kabbashi’s stance.

In early 2022, after Hemeti sent his forces to Port Sudan to resolve internal conflicts and protect civilians, the Commander-in-Chief of the SAF issued a decree assigning the 1970 Maritime Law to the Ministry of Defense, rather than the Border Commission, an independent body overseeing Sudanese border issues. This decree effectively placed all ports along the Red Sea under the Ministry of Defense’s indirect supervision.

Shadows of Conflict: The UAE’s Controversial Role in Sudan’s Strife

With the outbreak of war on April 15 between the SAF and the RSF, accusations of UAE involvement emerged amid government silence. It wasn’t until March 29, 2024, that Ambassador Al-Harith Idris

issued a memorandum explicitly accusing the UAE of participating in the aggression against Sudan alongside Chad and the Central African Republic. This was followed by a public statement from Lt. Gen. Yasser Al-Atta, the SAF’s assistant commander-in-chief, and protests against the UAE in the Red Sea state. Despite this, the UAE remains a significant investor in Sudan, and the Sudanese presence is firmly established in the UAE market.

In “[War on Sheep Legs](#),” Magdi El Gizouli highlighted the relationship between population growth in the Gulf and the nomadic livestock of Kordofan and Darfur, with Sudan and Somalia providing around 80% of the Gulf’s meat imports. Al-Jizouli explained that the livestock raised in these areas fuels the Gulf cities, where meat serves as the energy source for the Gulf workers’ productivity, much like how oil powers electricity.

Country/ year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Saudi Arabia	549.1	510.1	284.9	365.3	317.3
Yemen	14.4	8.5	12.5	5.2	5.3
UAE	944.6	1,067.0	1,637.5	2,967.8	2,076.2
Jordan	23.0	91.2	24.1	23.9	37.0
Syria	22.3	32.9	22.7	16.7	16.0
Iraq	1.1	0.5	0.8	0.6	0.1
Total	1,638.394	1,779.3	2,068.6	3,464.1	2,518.0

Arab Countries’ Imports from Sudan (in millions of dollars) (2018-2022)

Source: Based on data from the [Central Bank of Sudan](#), Economic and Financial Report 2022, Table (10)

The Coming Scenario

The RSF's transformation into mere "mercenaries," as described by Arif El-Saui in his report "[The UAE's Last Bet: Hemeti or the Kiseebah Mercenaries](#)", accurately reflects the situation during the conflict. The UAE's gamble now hinges on two points: Understanding Hemeti's position in its strategic equation and the internal transformations within the RSF, particularly the rise of Hemeti's older brother, Abdelrahim Daglo, following Hemeti's notable disappearance.

Despite the RSF's expanding control in Sinnar, its increased presence in Al-Jazirah state, and the establishment of its civilian administrations in Darfur, it is not exempt from facing repercussions for the violations committed during the war. The United States has begun to intervene, with Secretary of State Blinken inviting the SAF and RSF to Geneva meetings, alongside consultations with Saudi Ara-

The UAE's gamble now hinges on two points: Understanding Hemeti's position in its strategic equation and the internal transformations within the RSF, particularly the rise of Hemeti's older brother, Abdelrahim Daglo, following Hemeti's notable disappearance.

bia, the UAE, Egypt, and the European Union, with the UN as an observer. However, these efforts may not quickly end the military conflict or reach a conclusive resolution unless the conflicting parties' allies agree on satisfactory political and financial terms.



First published in Arabic, **Atar** weekly magazine, issue 40, August 1, 2024.



Sudan in Perspective

From

FACTSD

FACTS CENTER FOR JOURNALISM

Journalists Working on Sudan,
anywhere.

To receive a pdf copy of Atar magazine,
you can subscribe via Email or WhatsApp:

atar@sudanfacts.org

+254115438212



@atarnetwork