

Unveiling the Unseen: The Role of the Gulf over the Sudanese Transition Period

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ABSTRACT *Sudan, an African-Arab country, has in recent years been witnessing the political transformation process of the revolution-coup spiral. The Sudanese people, who overthrew the 30-year-old regime, are not satisfied with the revolution that came into power in 2019. This new conjuncture, which can barely be called a revolution, did not solve the structural problems such as corruption, unemployment, injustice, or inability to rule. Therefore, the fire of revolution and the desire for democracy have not yet died out in Sudan. However, the role of external and internal actors influencing the country's transformation process deserves scrutiny. In this sense, this piece seeks to answer the question of how Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been actively involved in and diverting the transformation process in Sudan. The main claim of the study is that the Saudi-UAE axis is diligent in establishing an authoritarian military regime in Sudan. The notions of secularization and normalization with Israel stand out among the projects that the UAE is trying to implement in Sudan. The UAE and Saudi Arabia, using petro-dollar as a tool, are directly engaging in Sudan's transition period.*

Keywords: Sudan, Revolution, External Powers, Transition Period, Gulf Countries, Anti-Democratic Policy

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Introduction

Even though many commentators argue that the Arab streets are away from any demonstration yearning for political demands after what happened to Syria and Egypt, the latest developments indicate that there is always hope to change the course of the political atmosphere in the Middle East. Since late 2018, Iraq, Algeria, and Sudan have witnessed a new wave of protests as part of what many have called ‘the second wave of the Arab Spring.’¹ The socio-political aspects of these prove that the Arab revolutions reveal in proper time. Therefore, the view that perceives the Arabs only as an object in terms of democratization appears to be inaccurate in light of the ongoing protests within the region. The people of the Arab streets have repeatedly raised their voices and taken to the streets under autocratic surveillance regimes.

The Sudanese people have been struggling with internal and external actors to transform the country into a democratic state. In December 2018, they began protesting on the streets against Omar al-Bashir, who had intermittently but continuously ruled the country for nearly 30 years, eventually being removed from power by a coup d’état on April 11, 2019. However, the democratic transition has not been implemented into the state system, therefore many structural obstacles remain, such as economic stagnation and high inflation remain. In addition to these, Sudan has a traditional problem which is the intervention of the army into the country’s

politics. Since 1956, approximately 40 military coups have taken place on Sudan’s political stage. It shows that the army attributes to itself the role of the guardian of Sudan. Therefore, Sudan’s top military official, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan is decisive in not sharing the government with any other actors, demonstrated by the latest purge against Prime Minister Abdalla Hamduk which was staged on October 25, 2021. The latest muddle is named by many as coup in coup² or aimless coup.³

This paper focuses on the role of the Gulf, namely the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, in Sudan’s transition period. How were they involved in protests? What are their main motivations? How and with whom do they cooperate? Are they involved in Sudan’s internal process due to a power struggle over the geopolitical importance of the country? Based on field research, which was conducted in Khartoum for three months, it is argued that the Sudanese revolution seems to have resulted in the country witnessing a political transition which increases the role and influence of the Gulf in the region, more specifically the UAE and Saudi Arabia.⁴ What is unique and worth observing regarding Sudan is the dynamics of the gradual changes in the foreign and domestic political arena. What we argue is that Sudan, between the dilemma of revolution and coup, is more likely to join the pro-authoritarian bloc⁵ by approaching and inclining with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Even though the transitional government and the army have

divergent political opinions in some cases, the political future of Sudan will likely favor being dependent on the anti-revolutionary camp led by the UAE.

Counter-Revolution

The fear about a democratic revolution that is surrounding the middle eastern monarchies and making them paranoid has not ended even though counter-revolutionary camps have been contending to wipe out the wave of protests. In Libya, putschist Haftar has been backed by those who organized a military coup against the one and only democratically elected president of Egypt, Mohammed Morsi. A similar scenario was applied in Syria and Yemen. It appears that so far the anti-revolution camp is focusing on fighting against the democratization of the Middle East; however, this policy hasn't stopped the will of the Arab streets. Since 2018, public demonstrations have once again awakened the fear of the anti-revolutionary camp. In this sense, the UAE and Saudi Arabia felt that they must intervene in the protests and divert them through a process in which only they can gain. Several protesters chanted against the UAE and Saudi Arabia stating that they shouldn't interfere with Sudan's internal affairs. Moreover, they expressed their anger by shouting that they don't want any help from Saudi Arabia and the UAE even if they have to eat only '*falafel* and *ful or beans*.'⁶ The protesters have understood that the role of external actors, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, will not

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help them with their concerns. In addition to that, they have demanded from the transition government not to accept \$3 billion of economic aid, provided by the UAE and Saudi Arabia who have been active in Sudan for many years. They have gone one step further and requested from the government to freeze or cut the relations and all special, personal ties with these actors. Therefore, the Sudanese people understood that the essential factor that shapes the UAE and Saudi Arabia's Sudan policy is counter-revolution and status quo oriented political agenda. They have been following this policy orientation since the Arab revolution began. In this sense, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have so far supported authoritarian and militarist regimes to take control. They also want to build a new political atmosphere in which Sudan will be dependent on them and only follow the policy which is assigned by them. It is observed that instrumentalizing the oil economy of the Gulf is included in the policy for the investigation of the situation in question. In this sense, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia provide substantial economic aid

Since the coup in 2019, it can be seen that Sudan became addicted to foreign aid, which helps the UAE and Saudi Arabia to penetrate Sudan's political transition process

to Sudan. For example, Saudi Arabia provided financial support to Sudan worth \$1.5 billion in 2019.⁷

Revealing the Emirati Role

The Sudanese people have shown their determination throughout the protests. In this sense, they opposed the long-running dictatorial system and now they are resisting the external actors' involvement. The UAE is among the top of those actors. The policy of the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed towards Sudan is not excluded from his plan to build a new regional order. In this sense, Sudan has an important position: for transforming the region into a more stable but dictatorship-based system, the UAE has sided with an army that doesn't want to democratize the country. To put it differently, Abu Dhabi wants to prevent any Islamist movement from taking power and democratizing the country. In this sense, the UAE has been investing in armies that are eager to build autocratic regimes. Moreover, by backing the protest in June 2019, the UAE courted the army and suc-

ceeded in building authoritarianism in Sudan.⁸ Therefore, it can be stated that the effective role of the UAE in the process of Sudan's revolution is directly related to the policy of the UAE which is reshaping the regional order of the Middle East. By achieving a successful coup in Egypt, trying to bring Haftar to power in Libya, standing by the anti-Ghannouchi figures in Tunisia and the putschists in Turkey, the UAE followed a similar policy in Sudan by cooperating with autocratic actors. In this sense, many analyses emphasized that the UAE and its allies –defining them as anti-revolutionary actors– have been pursuing to project the Egyptian scenario in Sudan.⁹ Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, who holds a strong portion of power¹⁰ in the Sovereign Council of Sudan, is known for his close ties with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE. He joined a war against the Houthis in Yemen. He has visited these countries several times and continued to cooperate with them. Moreover, it is alleged that Dagalo and al-Burhan, who is the head of Transitional Military Council (TMC), secretly met with Emirati and Saudi officials portraying them as reliable allies. They declared that they have never contacted and cooperated with Islamists and the axis of supporters such as Turkey, Qatar, or Iran. In this sense, the new political elite of Sudan has sided with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In support of their position, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have equipped them with weapons, money, and a good reputation in western capitals and the Arab media. Since the coup in 2019, it can be seen that Sudan became addicted



Fighters from a Saudi-backed Sudanese-Yemeni military force battling Houthi rebels are pictured near the border with Saudi Arabia in Yemen's Northern coastal town of Midi, on May 23, 2021.

MOHAMMED AL-WAFI / AFP via Getty Images

to foreign aid, which helps the UAE and Saudi Arabia to penetrate Sudan's political transition process.

Due to Sudan's geographic position, the UAE is likely to intervene in Sudanese politics. Moreover, the UAE perceives Sudan as a place from which mercenaries can be easily recruited. In this sense, the UAE has been implementing a multi-dimensional investment policy into Sudan for enrolling the Sudanese youth into the battlefields. By planning to exploit Sudan by using its youth for generating or instrumentalizing, the UAE plays petro-dollar diplomacy. The economy is getting worse day by day in Sudan with unemployment causing several problems one of which is that the young population are choosing to work as mercenaries.¹¹ This is a strong reason why the UAE does not want a stable economy in Sudan.¹² Therefore, one dimension of the UAE's efforts

to exert influence over Sudan is the functionality of the mercenaries. In this context, the Sudanese formation of some of the mercenaries instrumentalized by the UAE, especially in the war fields of Yemen and Libya, reveals the geopolitical importance of Sudan for Abu Dhabi.¹³

On the other hand, another dimension of the UAE and Saudi Arabia's effectiveness in Sudan is directly related to the aforementioned actors' policies towards Turkey. It can be said that the anti-Turkey politics, which has been pushed to be adopted as a state policy by the teams formed around the crown princes in both countries for the last ten years, also manifests itself in the context of Sudan. This policy, which has a similar dimension to the opposition to democratization, basically aims to make poor countries such as Sudan fall into an economic bottleneck and

make them dependent on the oil-rich UAE-Saudi axis. Military dictatorial governments have been seen as very useful regimes in this respect for the aforementioned actors. However due to the transitional government, Sudan has not faced obvious challenges in terms of relations with Turkey, as the recent diplomatic engagement with high-level representation such as Burhan shows, Sudan wants to balance these actors' effects.¹⁴ Moreover, it can be argued that Sudan aims to approach Turkey to prevent the country from becoming dependent on the UAE and Saudi Arabia¹⁵ either politically or economically.

Two Mega Projects to Conduct

On the other hand, it can be said that two concrete policies have started to be implemented into society and politics. The first one is secularization, the second is normalization with Israel. In many parts of the country, especially in the capital city Khartoum, these two policies are shaped, backed, and diverted by the UAE-Saudi Arabia axis, more specifically the UAE. Even though the people are standing against¹⁶ these two policies, it is easily observed in Sudan that the political elites are making the decisions. Although the transition government implies that the aforementioned political steps are motivated to improve relations with the West and increase the level of development, it would not be wrong to say that the catalyst for both secularization and normalization with Israel in the Middle East in the UAE. The UAE's obsession

with political Islam has fueled the politics of secularism in the region.¹⁷ Similarly, the UAE made its alliance with Israel, which it has anyway been pursuing for many years, official in September 2020. Moreover, it made Bahrain a satellite for itself and ensured its normalization with Israel. In this sense, we can say that Bahrain became the backyard of the UAE, not Saudi Arabia anymore. Using the Western Sahara card in the Moroccan context, the UAE used the economic support card in Sudan, enabling the country to decide to normalize with Israel. In this sense, the UAE wants to make the transitional government in Khartoum dependent on itself by opening the channels of aid for Sudan to get both U.S. compensation and economic benefits. However, the observations made in the field show that the policies of both secularization and normalization with Israel are not adopted by the public. Moreover, it can be said that the aforementioned imposing political steps were strongly rejected by the public, leading to a series of protests that included civil actions, such as street closures, almost every day. It is also noteworthy that the preachers made speeches against the steps of normalization and secularization, especially in the second part of the Friday sermons. It can be said that the public gave serious support to the aforementioned preachers, who expressed free thoughts instead of being clergy of the authority. In this sense, the focus of many of the speeches made in front of the microphone by anyone after the prayer –which has become a culture in Sudan– were about the sec-

ularization and normalization policies that the transitional government is trying to impose. In the light of the observations, it can be said that it is very difficult for the people to adopt the policies that the transitional government is trying to impose when the daily problems such as electricity-water cuts, exorbitant increases in the exchange rate, and increase in inflation are considered. In this context, I can say that during my research I have witnessed that the implementation of these two policies in the short term is considered quite dangerous for the stability of Sudan.¹⁸ The transitional government can gradually implement secularization and normalization steps without overcoming the economic problems. In other words, the short-term implementation of the government's secularization and normalization decisions may cause more public anger. The Sudanese people, who suffer from many problems with shortages in electricity, water, gasoline, and high inflation rates, and often express their thoughts by burning tires and closing the streets, may face a military conflict situation. In addition, considering the claim that nearly 150 armed groups exist in the capital Khartoum, in the light of field observations if the transitional government in Sudan is to pursue policies in line with the wishes of the UAE it will destabilize both the Red Sea geopolitics and the Middle East politics. The said instability serves the interests of the UAE and Israel,¹⁹ which are fed by instability.

It seems that the UAE has followed a more aggressive, non-mediated pol-

It is easily observable in Sudan that China and its cultural activities –like elsewhere in the Middle East– are spreading rapidly. In this sense, Sudan is a clear example of the power competition of regional and great powers

icy in the last decade. Therefore, the allegations of returning to mediation²⁰ do not seem intimate. However, it can be said that the UAE mostly wants Sudan to be transformed and has taken steps in this sense. The close relationship the UAE has established with the transitional government and its support for some opposition parties should be evaluated in this context. It is an important development that in March, the local newspapers of Sudan reported that Abdulaziz al-Huli, the leader of a rebel group in the Southern Blue Nile, agreed with the transitional council that they would establish a secular state. Abu Dhabi undoubtedly has a role in this development, which is in line with the notion of supporting militarist and secular states in the UAE's regional policy.

Hosting Rivalries

Sudan has been an arena for regional and international rivalries. The Gulf countries have been investing in Su-

Chairman of the Sovereignty Council General Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman al-Burhan (R) visits the army corps after the Sudanese army foiled a coup attempt in the country in Khartoum, Sudan on September 21, 2021.

Sovereignty Council of Sudan / AA



dan to gain political power. On the other hand, the western powers and the Russia-China bloc have been increasing their political, social, economic interest in Sudan. It is easily observable in Sudan that China and its cultural activities –like elsewhere in the Middle East– are spreading rapidly. In this sense, Sudan is a clear example of the power competition of regional and great powers. The rivalries in Sudan do not contribute to any substantial development. There is no cohesion or consensus over the transition period among the great powers and the regional powers. This is easily seen in the latest attempt of the United Nations Security Council's meeting over the latest developments in Sudan. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) could not agree to a joint statement about the transition period and the recent purge in Sudan. This clearly shows that there

is a great deal of political conflict and competition to control the political landscape of Sudan. Since the transitional government took power, Sudan became more vulnerable to external support. The recent Gulf crisis showed that to maintain its financial support, which influences most African states' foreign activities, Sudan followed a hedging strategy. In this sense, Sudan plays all sides, does not take one side but instead tries to be neutral.

Due to the great power struggle over the land, Sudan wants to obtain all economic sources. In 2019, Saudi Arabia invested \$12 billion, the UAE \$7 billion, and Qatar \$4 billion in Sudan. These financial cards diverted Sudan's foreign policy. Therefore, Sudan joined the Saudi-led coalition in the Yemen war. Moreover, when requested, Sudan sided with Saudi

Arabia in terms of severing ties with Iran. However, in the last days of al-Bashir's reign, the relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and Sudan have deteriorated. Al-Bashir did not become a satellite of these countries in terms of political Islam. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been waging a war on political Islam and its supporters. Sudan more specifically al-Bashir did not encounter and pressure Islamists in Sudan or elsewhere in the region. Therefore, al-Bashir was punished and overthrown by the protests which were backed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. All the Gulf including Qatar, with whom Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been in a power struggle in the Middle East and Sudan, focused on preserving their investments. In this sense, to limit Qatari influence and make Sudan undemocratic and dependent on them, Saudi Arabia and the UAE sided with the military in Sudan. These actors became involved in Sudan's transition period by using financial aid to divert the political process. As a result, the transitional government allied with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while cutting its ties with Qatar.²¹ The new military-political elite in Sudan let Qatar, which had had a close relationship al-Bashir, down. Therefore, Sudan hosts power rivalries of the Gulf and gave up a neutral role. By building a democratic-looking military dictatorship, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have activated their democracy preventive doctrine by which they aim to blockade the progress of any democratic movement. In post-revolution Sudan, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) rivalry would be intensified given that

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Sudan's economic and political situation is fragile. Day by day, this situation becomes worst. During our observation and stay in Khartoum, we experienced the effects of inflation, which at the time was more than 400 percent. Therefore, the political future of Sudan will more likely be determined by economic factors.²² In this sense, the UAE also targets to erode the role of Turkey in Sudan in terms of several projects such as infrastructure, scholarship, and restoring the Suakin Islands.²³ Since Turkey's presence in Sudan is more about humanitarian diplomacy, which makes Sudanese people favor the Turkish government and the support of Turkey to Sudan for becoming a democratic country, the UAE and Saudi Arabia see Turkey as a threat to their regional order.

Conclusion

Since 2019, Sudan has been experiencing a geopolitical transformation that has been delayed. The Gulf especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia turned the

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protests in their favor. They both sided with the military to build even more authoritarian stability in Sudan than had been established under Omar al-Bashir. Their target is to make Sudan dependent on their regional agenda. What is remarkable about Sudan's transition period is the role of external actors. The aforementioned two Gulf countries intervened in Sudan in many ways to cope and deal with the democratization process of the country. In this sense, due to al-Bashir keeping good relations with Turkey, Iran, and Qatar, his indulgence to the Muslim Brotherhood, and non-participation of the new regional bloc led by the UAE, he was opposed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. For example, Saudi Arabia stopped paying the salaries of Sudanese soldiers. What led to the revolution in Sudan was the cutting of subsidies on bread, a policy that triggered the protests. The UAE was the actor who halted fuel shipments to Sudan. One more step forward, without foreign aid, Sudan became more unstable.

Moreover, al-Bashir stayed neutral during the Gulf crisis. In addition to

this position, he received \$2 billion in loans from Qatar. Therefore, what has been happening in terms of the transition of government in Sudan is about the power struggle over the country. On the one hand, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have been eager to incorporate Sudan into their political bloc. On the other hand, Qatar-Turkey, and Islamist movements are not leaving the Sudanese people unsupported. It was argued that during the protest the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt coordinated the coup against al-Bashir by influencing Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo who was responsible for joining the war in Yemen. The UAE and Saudi Arabia seem to have succeeded in bringing Sudan into their axis. They both financed the new regime while on the other hand, Egypt has been using its lobbies in the Arab League to keep Sudan within the organization.²⁴ Cairo is also working for the new regime in Sudan by cooperating with International Monetary Fund (IMF) to loan money to the country. The new regime in Sudan is therefore closer to the UAE and Saudi Arabia bloc. This is easily seen in the latest secret deals and diplomatic moves. It is argued that in April 2019, the UAE provided weapons to Hemedti, before which the officials of both sides had met several times. To summarize, since the revolution in 2019 Sudan is now experiencing a new alignment policy. In this sense, the role of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Sudan is more apparent. By becoming more dependent on the UAE and Saudi Arabia, it can be predicted that the Islamists in Sudan will face more challenges. The

latest purge reveals that there is no harmony in Sudan's sovereign council in which the military wing led by al-Burhan is more eager to cooperate with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Dagalo's alleged visit to Israel and al-Burhan's meeting with high-level officials in Cairo and Abu Dhabi also proves that Khartoum is closer to the authoritarian bloc that consists of these actors. In this manner, it can be stated that by using the normalization or formalization with the UAE²⁵ as leverage, Israel wants to establish and preserve militaristic authoritarianism in Sudan. Lastly, recent information that I have taken from the field suggests that a large influx of money into the country is expected. On the other hand, the fragile economic situation of Sudan also opens a gateway for the UAE and Saudi Arabia to divert the political transition period. Therefore, as long as structural problems are not solved, foreign intervention into the transition period will continue. ■

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Greece's Unlikely Compellence | Air Force Modernization & Diplomatic Assertiveness

Rifat Öncel

Due to the current uncertain trajectory of Greek military modernization, this paper discusses the strategic logic that guides its armament and diplomatic activism rather than a measurement of the emerging balance of power. In line with its compellence strategy, Greece wants to command the Aegean Sea and to deny the Eastern Mediterranean Sea to Turkey.

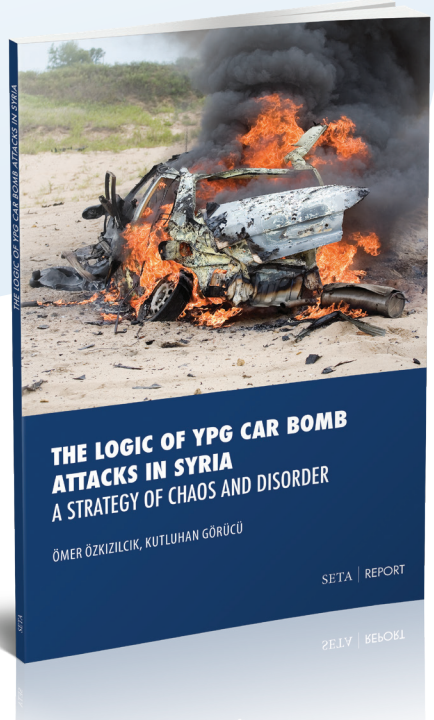


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Ömer Özkizilcik, Kutluhan Görücü

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