



Working Report

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THE CURRENT CRISIS IN SUDAN AND THE ROLE OF THE EMERGING ASSERTIVE POWERS BLOC (Germany, Russia, Turkey and Israel)

1. SUDAN IN FOCUS

Russia is Sudan's main military partner providing 85% of its military imports. In 2019 Sudan and Russia signed an agreement granting the Russian Navy access to Sudanese ports. Russia, since 2019, has been promoting the development of a huge naval base in Sudan. The relevant agreement has not been signed yet. According to AP News (11/2/2023) Sudan military finishes review of Russian Red Sea Base deal and awaits the formation of a civilian government and a legislative body to ratify the agreement before it takes effect.

Also, through an informal agreement with the de facto leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) General Daglo (Hemeti), Russia's Wagner mines gold from Sudan in order to finance the war in Ukraine.

Sudan Tribune (15/11/2022) wrote the following with regard to a surprising u-turn in the relations of Hemeti with the U.S. A former senior adviser to the U.S. Department of State stated that Hemeti seeks closer cooperation with the United States. The newspaper also reported that David Philips (the Director of the Peace-Building and Human Rights Program, Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights) said that the RSF leader is ready to cut his ties with Russia adding that "Hemeti acknowledges that the Russia trip was a mistake and now seeks closer cooperation with the United States".

As early as August 6, 2019, Irina Tsukerman of BESA Center reported the following:

"In Sudan, Hemeti, who comes from the tribal and largely secular Janjaweed, has made an alliance with the Islamists along the lines of Mubarak's alliance with the Brotherhood, similarly leaving little room for genuine liberal-minded reformists. As with Egypt, foreign interference on behalf of Islamists is also present in Sudan. Qataris have used left-leaning European media, such as The Guardian, known for its indiscriminate promulgation of Qatari conspiracy theories and rumors, to accuse Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt of masterminding violence against protesters, although the true reason for the crackdown is not yet known and none of these countries has anything to gain from more bad publicity or bad relations with the Sudanese."

On the other hand, according to Middle East Monitor (19/4/2023) the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan has taken the side of the Sudanese army led by General Abdul Fattah al-Burhan in its fight against RSF.

In the context of the above highly fluid geopolitical environment in the wider region (the unpredictability and u-turns of General Daglo and his close contacts with the Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood) Sisi's government is expected to be skeptical on the real intentions of the key players in Sudan and to act as a result with extreme caution.

German-Sudanese relations are steadily - and carefully on the part of Germany so as not to provoke Washington's reactions - improving with a focus on the development of cultural and academic relations as well as on the implementation of large investment programs. In particular, Sudan entrusted the Germans with the construction of the Merowe Dam, the largest on the African Continent.

Erdogan has contributed the most to the development of strong relations with Sudan with a special focus on the creation of a large naval base in this country. Amin Mohammed reported in the Middle East Eye (19/3/2018) the leasing of the Sudanese island Suakin to Turkey in a 99-year contract, to which regional rivals like Egypt and Saudi Arabia have reacted with skepticism and suspicion. Turkey has denied attempts to build a military base in Suakin. This deal was cancelled by the transitional government after Bashir's overthrow.

Sudan-Israel relations are rapidly and unexpectedly improving with Egypt's Sisi applauding this improvement and with PM Netanyahu contributing decisively to the improvement of these relations.

We note that immediately after the full diplomatic recognition of Sudan by Israel and the visit of Eli Cohen in Khartoum in 2021 the Israeli Intelligence Minister visited also Sudan. It is possible that Israelis, during this visit, had raised the issue of the establishment of a listening spot in Sudan similar to that in Eritrea overlooking Dahlak islands and the Horn of Africa. There exist two areas of interest in Sudan: the mountains area along Sudanese Red Sea coast ranging between 1000 and 1700 meters and the Deriba Caldera high peak of 3000 meters in south-eastern Sudan. From the above two the Deriba Caldera seems to be the most suitable one for gathering information from central and sub-Saharan Africa accommodating most of Islamic extremist organizations.

2. THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE RED SEA REGION

Mediterranean and Red Sea are the two sea trade routes which feed Israel with the 'oxygen' required to stay alive. Hence the geo-political significance of these two routes for Israel is enormous. Presently, Britain possesses military/naval bases at the two most strategic posts of Mediterranean, at Gibraltar and at Cyprus.

Regarding the other vital sea route, the Red Sea, Israel is doing better than in the Mediterranean by having already invested heavily in the Horn of Africa and especially in Eritrea where it has established a military base/airport in the strategic post of the Dahlak island 'overlooking' the entrance to the Red Sea and 'controlling' most of the area around. Note that the islands of Dahlak and Sokotra (the latter belonging to Yemen and situated at an Euclidean distance of approx. 1000 km from the former) constitute an insular dipole of paramount geo-strategic importance, through which the Horn of Africa can be effectively controlled. The British, on the other hand, seem to have developed an advanced geo-political understanding of this area (including the Israeli designs there) and in the 2010's have 'put' Catherine Ashton (the then EU foreign minister) to 'supervise' militarily the thorny Horn. The EU flotilla operating under her political supervision around the Horn of Africa, according to credible sources, only nominally was targeting at Somali pirates whose hide-outs and bases could be effectively destroyed in a period of few months. Instead, a naval 'supervision' of the area (and particularly of the entrance to the strategic route of the Red Sea) seems to be the hidden political aim of the naval force, especially during such an unstable period for the region

3. OTHER RELEVANT ISSUES

Of relevant interest are the following issues:

- The close cooperation between Israel and Ethiopia/Eritrea mainly in the military and security sector.
- Berlin's Middle Eastern and North African strategic initiatives and especially the development of cultural (mainly archaeological) and academic relations at a first phase.
- Netanyahu's significant contribution to the development of good relations between Israel and Russia as well as to the development of strategic relations with Germany mainly promoted by the "Merkel-Netanyahu" duo, which have been targeted recently by the U.S. Democrats and the Biden administration.

Germany-Egypt relations are very strong and multidimensional. The agreements signed between the two countries in the field of security and intelligence and the contacts of top BND officials with their Egyptian counterparts are characteristically mentioned.

4. CONCLUSION

The geopolitical environment around and inside Sudan is dangerously fluid and the recent turns of key players there are questioning the real motives of their initiatives.

Recently all four members of the emerging Assertive Powers Bloc (eAPB) exhibit a strong and converging, in some cases, interest to enhance relations with the Red Sea countries and especially Sudan, mainly in the military and security sphere.

Washington is most concerned with the penetration and increasing influence of the eAPB in the hot and strategic regions of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. This concern takes alarming proportions as a result of the unprecedented worsening of Washington relations with all four members of the eAPB. Note that in a highly provocative move PM Netanyahu decided not attend the annual conference of the Jewish Federation of North America in Tel Aviv. On the other hand, the Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu, in an unprecedented statement, condemned Armenian genocide remarks of U.S. President Biden calling him a "charlatan". Furthermore, during the last

two decades U.S.-German relations reached an all-time low as a result of the initiatives of Merkel governments to enhance economic relations with China and especially with Russia ignoring relevant Washington's strategic security interests. The recent Germany's u-turn with respect to its relations with Russia has not yet passed the viability time test to be trusted as a genuine one.

In the context of the above highly unstable geopolitical environment, Egypt with its cautious and peace-promoting diplomacy can be trusted as a mediator in resolving current dangerous conflicts in Sudan, Libya and the Red Sea region with the support of U.S. which are recently taking a more assertive and clear role in the Sudanese and Libyan imbroglio.