

Sudan: Assassination of a UK national shows the true face of an unchanged regime

By Neil Partrick

A British national of Sudanese origin, Majed Hassan, was one of four 'foreigners' assassinated in West Darfur in mid to late January. In what became several days of horrific violence in the regional capital Al-Geneineh and in two proximate camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), more than 200 people died. The initial cause was that 'Arab' tribesmen sought revenge for the killing of one of their number against members of a non-Arab ('African') tribe, the Masalit. While the perpetrator for the original murder had come forward to police, the Arab tribesmen still felt free to exact murderous violence against fellow Sudanese whose IDP status was due to systematic abuse and dispossession at the hands of state-organised militias.

Those members of the huge Rizaigat Arab tribe exacting revenge at the initial stages of the conflict may not have been official members of the notorious state militia known as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). However it has long been the case that the Sudanese state has been associated with armed Arab tribal members bent on intimidating non-Arab Darfuris. Such state-orchestrated violence reached its apotheosis in 2003 when the state armed the Janjaweed, an Arab militia, in a deliberate and concerted attempt to put down a rebellion rooted in structural inequality. The resulting systematic ethnic cleansing exacted on the state's behalf by the Janjaweed has continued to define the political and armed struggle taking place in Darfur. Even a recent peace agreement involving Gulf Arab and international support is based on the same structural inequality and has therefore failed to provide a reliable and neutral basis for upholding security in Darfur.

It is one of the misleading truisms over the struggle in Darfur that the violence results from a fight over land tenure. Those Darfuris defining themselves as 'Arab' are traditionally semi-nomadic pastoralists lacking ownership of land, while the 'African' farmers who have held usually modest fixed land assets have grown crops as well as raised cattle. In the course of the violence in the early Noughties, defined by the US as a genocide against the settled non-Arab Darfur community, many became and remain IDPs in sometimes permanent-looking camps. Many others are still refugees in Chad; more became refugees

there after the January 2021 killings. Against this background what is simplistically dubbed by some as ‘communal violence’, took hold again in West Darfur; a conflict overseen and largely conducted by RSF state militia fighters, including from other parts of Darfur and, it’s claimed, from Chad and possibly from African states much further afield.

Majed’s assassination

On January 16th, as this gross orgy of violence was being conducted, the UK national Majed Hassan was moving somewhere between El-Geneineh, the West Darfur capital, and the proximate Krinding IDP camp located to the city’s east. According to a family member, Majed was deliberately and, from some distance, shot in the neck. Heavily injured, Majed was then brutally beaten before, finally, being shot dead. Afaf Hassan¹ is an activist on Sudan who regularly returns to El-Geneineh. She was related to Majed through marriage. Afaf says that this ‘big man’ was only there to visit family. When the shooting started, Majed placed himself in front of women and children. Majed, says a male relative, would definitely have been known to the RSF. They are very adept at differentiating between Darfuris who have never left the area and those like Majed who have spent time in the cities outside, he says. The relative noted that it was semi-outsiders like Majed who had revealed to the world the slaughter that took place in 2003. As someone who could therefore publicise in the west what is going on in Darfur now, this made Majed a clear threat to the regime. Majed’s murder was made easier by the fact that, shortly after he was killed, all media were prevented from entering the area.

Khamis Yousef Haroun is one of the UK leaders of the Masalit tribe from which Majed and many of those in El-Geneineh, and the proximate IDP camps, are a part. Khamis Haroun is a practising lawyer in the UK and an International Criminal Court ‘Duty Counsel’ (one who makes representation to the ICC on behalf of alleged victims). Khamis confirmed that his brother, the Sudanese national Ahmed Yousef Haroun, had also been deliberately targeted in the RSF militia shootings in El-Geneineh, while a first cousin and other relatives had been killed in the violence too. Khamis Haroun has written a report on the recent events in West Darfur and sent it to leading figures in the UK Government as well as to the heads of the two leading UK Opposition parties. He argues that the ‘Arab’ assailants attacking El-Geneineh and the two IDP camps were conducting a ‘premeditated’ attack that had the ‘logistical

support’ of the RSF who had armed them, given them armoured vehicles, and ‘provided cover’ in the camps including when they torched Krinding. Khamis Yousef says that his brother Ahmed and Majed Hassan were both found dead in Ahmed’s house in Krinding camp. This house was known to the RSF, he says, given that they had visited it twice before, on two consecutive days (31.12.19 and 1.1.20), with the intent of killing Ahmed. On both occasions Ahmed was away, working with UNAMID (UN-African Union Mission in Darfur – see below) in Nyala in South Darfur. This province was the location of clashes just a few days after those in West Darfur. Once again Arab tribesmen freely killed non-Arabs.



Krinding camp after the burning and killing. Picture c/o African Centre for Justice & Peace Studies <https://www.acjps.org>

According to Afaf Hassan, the attacks on non-Arabs in West Darfur were coordinated by the RSF, and they supplied the weapons. The RSF’s head is General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (AKA ‘Hemetti’). Directly overseeing the recent military operation in West Darfur was Musa Hamed Ambelu (pronounced ‘Am-bae-lo’), a Janjaweed leader who is ‘taking his orders from Hemetti.’ Put simply, ‘Musa Ambelu is an instrument for Hemetti,’ she says. Khamis Haroun confirms that Musa Ambelu is the RSF commander in West Darfur, while a Darfuri analyst who wished not to reveal their identity says that Ambelu is a ‘notorious RSF commander, known for robbery and terrorising civilians.’ This analyst also stated that Ambelu has two sons who are RSF soldiers, and alleges that they recently attacked a university student in Sudan because his activist brother, who lived abroad, had criticised the RSF. Unsurprisingly, and despite causing grievous injuries, Ambelu’s sons were not charged with any offences.



Musa Ambelu

Majed himself was no stranger to violence at the hands of Sudanese state, or state-related, forces. In the slaughter of non-Arab Darfuris exacted in 2003 by the Janjaweed, Majed's first wife and their two children were killed.

Majed's life in the UK

While it isn't definitively clear that the political leadership in Khartoum had explicitly instructed the Janjaweed to conduct a genocide in 2003, this was the predictable outcome of unleashing them. The Janjaweed were subsequently rolled up into the RSF. In the aftermath of the ethnic cleansing Majed had managed to get out of Sudan. After serving nine months in a UK jail due to perceived immigration irregularities, and faced with the threat of deportation, he eventually, after 10 years of waiting, secured UK nationality. He then formally changed his name by deed poll, perhaps seeking to put the horror of what had happened in Darfur behind him by changing what had been his given and family name: Shareef Barko.

In the years that followed Majed's arrival in the UK, this gracious, gentle man settled down to a highly industrious working life in London, including in a car body repair shop, and becoming active in defending the rights of migrants in the UK through ['Haringey Welcome'](#). Mindful of his own experience and those of other desperate Darfuris who had sought and continue to seek, often via

very circuitous and perilous routes, relative safety in Europe, [Majed and two fellow members of this advocacy group addressed a meeting of the European Parliament in October 2019.](#)



Majed with fellow 'Haringey Welcome' activists and four London members of the European Parliament (Picture © Haringey Welcome)

Majed remained committed to and highly involved in his life as a UK national, and had become a happy if seriously overworked Londoner. He lived in a small flat in Tiverton Road, Haringey, N15. The suffering in Darfur was never absent from Majed's mind, however, and in 2017 he began making what became annual return visits to his original homeland. A visit in 2020 had led to him, unexpectedly, getting married again, but, carrying a UK passport, he was getting more and more noticed by the Sudanese authorities.

The Darfur rebels

There has long been armed resistance among some non-Arabs in Darfur to the Khartoum regime. Historically this has involved such groups as Justice & Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM). Together with various breakaway factions, they formed the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), an amalgam of mostly Darfuri rebels, in 2011. In October 2020 the SRF and the new political leadership of (north) Sudan put

their final signatures to a peace agreement in Juba (the capital of South Sudan). A key Darfuri rebel group and SRF member, the ‘Sudan Liberation Movement - Abdul-Wahid Al-Nur’, rejected the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA). This group’s stronghold is in Jebel Marrah, a mountain range spanning central and southern Darfur, where it’s essentially a voice for the Fur tribe that lends the whole region its name. Its eponymous leader, who’s based in Paris, argues that joining the JPA would make the situation worse as, in his view, the ‘Agreement’ is actually about dividing up the spoils, not addressing the systematic and structural inequality that drives secessionist pressure and discontent.

It isn’t clear whether any of the recent fighting in West Darfur involved any of the Masalit or other non-Arab rebel Darfuri groups. Majed, and two American nationals and one Norwegian were in Sudan on tourist visas and were targeted by the RSF for what they represented, not for engaging in any armed action. According to Afaf Hassan, the previous disarmament of Darfuri groups, and the political realities engendered by the JPA, has left the non-Arab ‘rebel’ groups unable to defend their own people. A UN report issued in January 2021² (but published just prior to the West Darfur violence) noted that the disarmament process over several years has been conducted in a very piecemeal and highly selective manner, one that typically favours Arab fighters over non-Arab disputants. Afaf Hassan says that the local men in the two IDP camps near El-Geneineh would probably have rifles to defend themselves, but the ‘heavy weapons’ deployed by the RSF would have made this a very unequal fight. However an anonymous Darfuri analyst acknowledges that there have been plenty of Darfur rebel voices on social media demanding that RSF violence ‘not be accepted’, including among supporters of ‘hold-out’ groups currently resistant to ‘peace deals’. This analyst concludes that therefore some non-Arab rebel fighters would have been involved in the West Darfur violence too.

Dr Jihad S. Mashamoun is a Sudanese political analyst who writes regularly for [The Africa Report](#). He argues that those Darfur rebel groups who didn’t sign up to the JPA, like the SLM branch led by Al-Nur, and that of Abdulaziz Al-Hilu, a Masalit whose SPLM branch is focused on the Nuba³, are in a ‘defensive’ mode. These groups are not in his view seeking to militarily challenge regime forces. Those groups that *did* sign the JPA became part of the government. They then became caught up in long arguments over what their representatives’ precise role in government will be. However on February 8th 2021, a year of such deliberations was finally concluded when a new council of ministers was

announced. As has previously been agreed, it contained guaranteed seats for the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC; the amalgam of civil forces who had mobilised for Al-Bashir's removal as president), for the SRF militia groups who had signed the JPA, and for the military's choice of defence minister and interior minister.

According to Eddie Thomas⁴, a UK analyst who follows Sudan closely, groups like Al-Nur's are resistant to the JPA for legitimate reasons as they fear being pawns in a strategy that potentially takes away their guns and their wealth (Jebel Marrah has lucrative gold mines), but leaves them powerless to advance their constituency's interests. The regime that was supposedly overthrown when, in April 2019, Omar Al-Bashir was obliged to step down, has kept its armed components in place, along with many of the top military and militia officers who constituted the heart of state power, even if some key political props, such as the former ruling party the National Congress Party (NCP), are officially outlawed. In fact a new law approved in November 2019, after much debate within the transitional authorities, banned the NCP from involvement in politics for a decade on the understandable but deeply ironic basis that no senior figures in Bashir's regime should be holding political positions in the supposedly new state. Jihad Mashamoun argues that 'hold-outs' like Al-Nur are right to be resistant to joining the government despite the fact that so many other Darfur factions have: 'He's (Al-Nur) not wrong when he says that the regime is still there; we all can see that, even the people that have joined the transitional authorities know this,' says Mashamoun.



There was resentment in Darfur regarding those Darfur rebel forces, overwhelmingly made up of non-Arabs, who became tied to the state via the JPA. After the recent violence in West Darfur and the subsequent clashes in South Darfur, there was anger. Afaf Hassan, speaking as a non-Arab Darfuri, says her people have in effect been left defenceless. The Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), the grouping of mostly Darfuri Sudanese rebel factions that signed the JPA, are holed up in Khartoum hotels and can neither protect their people nor explain their decision, she argues. (There was an SRF visit to Darfur to promote the virtues of the JPA, but ironically it began on the day that the violence in El-Geneineh started. This was followed by the SRF chairman’s visit on February 9). In terms of what the JPA means to the non-Arabs of Darfur and their security, ‘it’s just a piece of paper,’ says Afaf Hassan.

Within 90 days the JPA was supposed to lead to the creation of a joint, 12,000-strong, ‘security keeping force’ for Darfur, drawn equally from the forces of the state ‘military establishment’ (*explicitly* stated as *including* RSF forces) and from the mostly Darfuri forces that make up the SRF.⁵ Trusting that this would happen, the UN Security Council agreed that UNAMID would withdraw by January 1 2021. By the time of the pull-out (when the 90 days were up), no such joint ‘security keeping’ force was in operation in Darfur. A few days after the UNAMID pull-out, Minni Minnawi, a JPA signatory on behalf of his eponymous Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) faction, made reference to the need for ‘rebel’ forces to be put on ‘an equal footing’ with the existing state military forces. He was also quoted as saying that ‘The Rapid Security Forces will continue to defend the revolution.’⁶ Only a month earlier Minnawi had urged that UNAMID stay on (see below). His assertion re the RSF’s ‘revolutionary’ credentials sounds more forlorn hope than reasonable expectation. An almost perverse hope at that.

Bashir’s legacy

Fundamental to whether there can be a sustainable peace in Darfur is the question of an equitable, transparent and accountable distribution of power and resources throughout Sudan. Any assessment of this necessitates understanding the nature of the regime that sits in Khartoum. Several years

prior to his ouster in April 2019 Omar Al-Bashir had agreed to an attempted cauterising of the bleeding existential wound that was the decades' long war between the 'northern' regime centred on Khartoum and the secessionist south. The latter became the independent state of 'South Sudan' in 2011. However this did not bring peace or economic advantages to the traditionally disadvantaged parts of what remained in (northern) Sudan including Darfur. The Republic of Sudan under President Omar Al-Bashir had in effect conceded much of its primary economic asset, oil, by virtue of agreeing to southern independence, albeit that there were, and are, still unaddressed territorial disputes in some of the oil-rich areas divided by the border that runs between Sudan and the new southern state.

Northern Sudan remained ruled by Bashir, the lead figure in an essentially military regime that still wore the same Islamist ideological cloak that the monopolistic and rigidly centralised governing political party, the NCP, used to mobilise the regime faithful, including in the face of party splits and Islamist dissent. A coup in partnership with the Islamist movement had brought Bashir, to power in 1989, and a military coup would drive Bashir from power 30 years later. (In 1999, having dislodged Hassan Al-Turabi, the Islamist power behind the throne, Bashir enjoyed more or less unalloyed authority for two decades). Jihad Mashamoun explains that over this 30 year period Islamism deeply penetrated the institutions of the state, including the military and government ministries. He assumes that the NCP, despite the ban, retains discreet influence in addition to the Islamist muscle that was deployed on the streets during and subsequent to the uprising that preceded Bashir's downfall.

The NCP had once provided Bashir and his allies with the means to maintain control of the state and then, in time, the means for that reconstituted state to maintain control over the people. Mashamoun says that Lt. General Abdul-Fattah Burhan, the head of the armed forces, and Hemetti, head of the RSF, fuel talk of a coup – Burhan addressed a rally in 2020 asking for a popular support for just such military intervention. In January that year the Sudanese military had put down an officers' revolt. A coup remains a possibility; one that Islamist officers loyal to the NCP could instigate. Mashamoun notes that Islamists, frustrated with the perceived power of civil politicians, say to Burhan in so many words, 'Why are you so quiet?' Supporters of these civil politicians and of reform understand that Burhan is very much a creature of the ongoing regime, and who was appointed out of loyalty to Bashir and, as likely, Islamism.

As they do not believe Burhan is ever likely to cede power to civil authorities, they wonder, says Mashamoun, why any civil leaders would work with him.

The Rapid Support Forces (RSF)

The Sudanese regime's brute power has relied in part on its conventional armed forces but, in common with many Arab republics, Bashir and his cronies ensured that a state militia – the RSF - maintained state i.e. regime security by the extent of its internal force and the loyalty of these militia to their state patron. The RSF was created by Bashir as a counter-insurgency militia force, precisely with the role of putting down revolt, whether in Darfur, South Kordofan, or Blue Nile state. Under this name, or the official tag *Al-Damm Al-Sarri* (literally 'rapid blood', though translatable as 'emergency help'), the RSF weren't just deployed against ethnic 'outsiders' though. Lt. General Hemetti became RSF chief after doing Bashir's bidding and arresting its former head, the Janjaweed tribal sheikh Musa Hilal, who had formed the Janjaweed into what was known as the Border Guard. Hilal had allegedly overseen the mass slaughter in 2003, however his capture in November 2017 reflected Bashir's own political fear of the weight Hilal exercised, not least as the *de facto* ruler of a large portion of Darfur. Says Afaf Hassan, Hemetti's control of the RSF led to about half of its fighters being transferred to Khartoum. This process, no doubt intended to neutralise an alternative pole of power and secure the centre, also helped secure Hemetti's increasing grip over the state.



Lt Gen Mohammed Hamdan Diaglo ('Hemetti') (Picture © AFP)

Hilal is a Rizaigi, like Hemetti, but with a more impressive tribal lineage. The anonymous Darfuri analyst explains that Hilal hails from a senior Rizaigat clan, the Mahamid, while Hemetti is from a sub-clan of the Mahamid, the Mahariyya. The UN notes⁷ that Hemetti has surrounded himself with senior RSF officers drawn from a small group from within this sub-clan, who are known as the *awlad Mansour*, including his brother Abdulrahman who's the RSF deputy chief. However Hemetti's weak spot, says Jihad Mashamoun, is the residual loyalty in parts of the RSF to their more sophisticated tribal patron, Hilal. The UN says that Hilal's fighters (the Sudanese Revolutionary Awakening Council (SRAC)) gathered in this tribal sheikh's northern Darfur heartland in June 2020 in order to collaborate with Al-Nur's SLM militia in taking on the Sudanese Army in Jebel Marrah in central Darfur⁸. However Hemetti has the power of economic patronage. Mashamoun explains that when Hemetti arrested Hilal on Bashir's instruction, he dispossessed him not only of his militia leadership but of a gold mine in Jebel Amer in north Darfur. While a press report in December 2019⁹ sourced Hemetti as offering to 'return' this mine to the state, Mashamoun notes that it earns Hemetti \$50m a year. Afaf Hassan claims that Hemetti's RSF helicopters transport around 40 kg of gold daily to Dubai. This doesn't mean that Hemetti won't be looking over his shoulder from time to time.

Mashamoun says that there have been two aborted attempts at reconciliation since Hilal was first arrested. He describes their conflict as akin to a 'civil war' and doubts that Hemetti can be sure of RSF loyalty in Darfur, even if he can be confident of it in Khartoum. This factor means that instability in Darfur will partly reflect their struggle for power. When the Sudanese president was removed from power in 2019, Hemetti had Hilal transferred to a jail controlled by the regular armed forces who maintain an uneasy alliance with the RSF chief.

Sudan's deep state has regional parallels

Despite these loyalty fears Hemetti's control of the RSF has given him enormous weight in the leadership of the state, whether under the Bashir presidency or under the current nominally combined military and civil leadership. In Baathist Iraq and Syria, and in the loosely comparable regime led by Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, a similar role to that of the RSF was performed by a Republican Guard that likewise functioned as a regime rather than a

national military force. In Iran, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) today perform a similar function for a ruling Persian nationalist-Shia Islamist hybrid, while the IRGC have arguably come close to superseding the power of the clerical leadership. In Saudi Arabia the National Guard were for decades the more loyal backbone of Al-Saud power than the regular armed forces, better funded, relatively more capable, and focused on internal security.

As the RSF were expanding the circle of violence in West Darfur in January, their head, Hemetti announced that 'Peace Shield Forces', drawn from the RSF, would be dispatched there. While conceivably these supposedly distinct forces would be issued different uniforms or would wear different epaulets on their shirts, Lt. General Hemetti was essentially seeking to cover his own responsibility for what had happened in West Darfur by sending a different branch of the same arsonists, but presented as firemen with a mission to supposedly douse the flames.

Hemetti is the vice-chairman of the joint Transitional Sovereignty Council (TSC) that constitutes the formal, ostensible, leadership of Sudan; the head of the armed forces, Lt Gen Abdul-Fattah Burhan, is the chairman. The TSC was agreed to by the Transitional Military Council that ruled Sudan after the top military brass had in April 2019 told Bashir and his immediate circle that their services would no longer be required. The street protests led by the Sudan Professionals Association (part of the FFC) had led not to the overthrow of the regime, but to its most senior military elements deciding that the discarding of several of the regime's public elements would be the most politically expedient response. Consequently President Bashir, officially speaking the NCP and, seemingly, state-promoted Islamism are no more.

In the north African states of Egypt and Algeria essentially military regimes continue to maintain power despite a similar ritualised rhetoric of revolution that, as ever, confuses the deep state's ability to exploit political protest with fundamental change to the nature and leadership of that state. In Egypt, having sacrificed Mubarak and his circle in 2011 the military constrained the power of the elected Muslim Brotherhood leadership before the military chief of staff, General Sisi, exploited a second wave of popular discontent to seize power two years later from the guileless Morsi and co. and become president in a highly managed election. In Algeria, hit like Sudan by the second 'Arab Spring' in April 2019, popular discontent didn't overthrow the decrepit and embarrassing face of the *ancien* regime (Bouteflika); the military did. Their

hand-picked new president, Abdul-Majid Tebboune, today maintains an awkward exercise of power in the face of continued public frustration with a claimed 'revolution' that brought personnel changes and a new constitution that superficially reordered the political system, but left 'le pouvoir' in place.

Sudanese-Israeli 'normalisation'

In Sudan the civilian component of the supposedly *joint* Transitional Sovereign Council is in effect led by Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdoug, the FFC's nominee. Ostensibly on behalf of the whole TSC, Hamdoug is negotiating with the IMF and with western aid donors. He is seeking to restructure an economy whose state regulation supposedly protected the poor but enabled an elite of loyalist businessmen to profit from black market trading and artificially fixed exchange rates. The fact that Hamdoug negotiated a US aid package totalling \$700m shows that he isn't devoid of authority and suggested that the US saw value in a move that, while intended for the whole government, would bolster the civil prime minister. However the award of the aid package had followed Sudan agreeing to diplomatic relations with Israel, a major Sudanese foreign policy shift that had nothing to do with the civilian component of the Sovereignty Council, who opposed it, as do many political parties, civil societal groups and the Islamists. The military, in the form of General Burhan, had already publicly engaged with Israeli premier Netanyahu. Burhan understood that this was part of a strategic reordering that would get Sudan off of the US' State Sponsors of Terrorism list, providing it also made further payments to the families of US victims of Al-Qaida attacks, and that this was also part and parcel of Khartoum's existing and growing alignment with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. [The Emiratis have spearheaded the recent wave of Arab normalisation with Israel](#), while the Saudis are currently in a diplomatic holding pattern. Senior Israeli officials visited Sudan prior to and following the announced deal, while the Sudanese military have dispatched representatives to confer with their counterparts in Israel. Although lacking the public displays of warmth seen in the high level expressions of normalisation between Gulf states, as well as Morocco, with Israel, the Sudan-Israel relationship could be the harbinger of close, discreet intelligence work utilising Israeli and Emirati-provided tech and the mutual exchange of information. Sudan's extant *mukhabarat* state will probably be more efficient now.

The military calls the shots

In contrast the popular Sudanese movement spawned by the political uprising in 2019, the FFC, continues to agitate for further political change (what are myopically described by some sympathisers as ‘the completion of the revolution’), but it has to do so from within a government subservient to the TSC. Following the formation in February 2021 of the latest ‘transitional’ council of ministers, this process is supposed to see an imminent empowering of a nominated Sudanese parliament, the switching in May 2021 of the TSC’s chairmanship from the military to the civilian sphere i.e. to the FFC, and preparations for national elections to form a supposedly democratic Sudanese government by the beginning of 2024.

Yet Sudan is being rocked by economic problems that have made a necessary restructuring hit the public harder than it has any dispossessed regime cronies. Ending the huge cost of fuel price subsidisation has made Hamdounk an unpopular man. This could even see the military oblige him to step aside, unless the current IMF-driven economic changes include the funding of a planned handout to compensate poorer Sudanese for the sharp rise in fuel costs. Getting this kind of international support may require further reforms. Sudan’s huge debt, Britain confirmed in late January 2021, will be eased providing further steps are taken on economic liberalisation. Britain’s foreign secretary, the seriously unprepossessing Dominic Raab, was pleased to proffer modest aid payments to PM Hamdounk though.

Islamists remains potent in Sudan

While the military remain the repository of power in Sudan, moves to secularise the state (as insecure Darfur ‘holdout’ groups have demanded) are being pursued cautiously by the civilian wing of the TSC. Says Mashamoun, this issue isn’t in the gift of the transitional authorities (Any such changes are supposed to be approved by the planned National Constitutional Conference). Mashamoun notes that a government discussion of secular state models with a holdout group as a basis to get them to join the government was opposed by an Islamist senior military officer, and TSC member, Lt. General Shamsaldin Kabbashi.¹⁰

Should the civilian face that Hemetti, Burhan and Co. have cleverly given their regime continue to struggle with, and get the blame for, the acute economic problems facing the country, then Islamists could become a rallying point for popular discontent. The professionals, trade unionists and established political parties whose agitation helped bring Bashir down, but whom are now largely tied to the TSC, would be largely powerless to intervene. While many of Sudan's Islamists have little enthusiasm for Bashir's disloyal former top military brass, they could make it easier for the latter to exploit popular frustration and sweep the civilian part of the TSC, including its troubled PM, aside. Notably, *Shariah* law hasn't yet been discarded and, despite the formal death of the NCP, Sudanese Islamism and fealty to it and to the NCP, is far from over. It could yet again be a useful tool for a regime that, while reconfigured, very much remains in place.

Mashamoun says there are 'strong suspicions' that NCP loyalists are taking up positions again. Even Gibril Ibrahim, the leader of the Darfuri 'rebel' group JEM (which, from February 8 2021, held two seats in the cabinet), is close to the Islamists, he says, even if not all JEM members are sympathetic. At the very least, the paradoxical overlap between the 'former' regime and its armed opponents is emphasised by the fact that JEM were brought in to government, along with much of the rest of the SRF, by Hemetti. This is surely one of his most decisive political successes.

In addition the Bashir-founded paramilitary forces that had an Islamic hue, such as the People's Defence Forces and the Islamic Battalions, haven't wholly been wound up. These elements have also previously been involved in slaughter in Darfur. The anonymous Darfuri analyst argues that paramilitary groups like the Islamic Battalions still conduct contracted killings even if they don't have the weight they once did.

The essential military and militia underpinnings of the 'former' regime remain despite the overthrow of the president and despite the same regime's new civilian and 'reformist' appurtenances. This is the regime that agreed the October 2020 'peace' deal (JPA) with the SRF Darfuri rebel movements. That deal has, in Jihad Mashamoun's words, made its rebel signatories 'part of the government'. However the events in West Darfur in January 2021, in which Majed Hassan and others were murdered by state forces, showed that non-Arab Darfuris are most definitely not part of the state, and arguably never will

be. The JPA was confirmed in its meaninglessness by the violence that engulfed West Darfur.

Shortly after the fall of Bashir, Hemetti had actively sought to engage the rebel alliance organised as the SRF under its ambitious leaders Minni Minnawi and Gibril Ibrahim, who are now senior cabinet members. This was precisely in order to break the cooperation of what, as militias, were known quantities, from the unpredictable civil and social groups organised in the 'Declaratory Forces' who had been instrumental in encouraging Bashir's removal. The JPA completed Hemetti's classic divide and rule objective as it brought most of the rebels into the governmental process. According to the UN, the SPLM (Al-Nur) faction, who remain firmly outside the process, have been riven by violent division as some sections have sought to cooperate with the RSF directly. In a different context this would be seen as traumatised victims offering to work for their abuser.

El-Geneineh strangled

Following the January 2021 killings in El-Geneineh a blockade cut off the city entirely. Photographic images showed an unruly looking group of armed Arab tribesmen preventing any vehicles from coming in or out of the West Darfur capital. Just as these fighters tried to storm the residence of the non-Arab Governor of West Darfur at the beginning of the January clashes in anger at the killing of only one of their number, so now the blockade was supposedly being solely organised by these irregulars with the aim of forcing the Governor's resignation and closing the local IDP camps for good. The Governor controls the fairly ineffectual local police force. Behind the angry tribesmen once again lay the power of Hemetti's RSF.

Says Afaf Hassan, the RSF were 'protecting' those conducting the blockade. Musa Ambelu, the RSF commander, was once again the man on the spot. As observed by the anonymous Darfuri analyst, the Arab tribesmen feel that Hemetti 'has their back.' Afaf Hassan feared that a deliberate policy of starvation was being pursued. The tribesmen's continued violence against those they have dispossessed of their homes and land seemed to be heading, in El-Geneineh at least, to another gruesome outcome. When, on February 7, the blockade was declared by these Arab tribesmen to have been lifted, they

stated that all of their demands were going to be met, including the wholesale dismantling of the IDP camps: a guaranteed recipe for chaos and killings.

A Gulf-sponsored Sudanese militia

More widely in Darfur the relationship between such violent instability and foreign relations, both of Hemetti's RSF and of his internal discontents, and those of Darfur rebel groups, is a key feature of the ongoing conflict. The RSF's power is part brute force – from being Bashir's 'former protector' as Mashamoun puts it – and part the personal economic heft of its boss, Hemetti and the various companies that he owns and controls. He has much greater economic resources at his disposal than the formal machinery of the state overseen by the finance ministry supposedly acting under the orders of PM Hamdoun, and greater than that afforded to the head of the conventional armed forces, Lt. General Burhan. Hemetti is regarded as a real 'nuisance' by Burhan (and by the latter's Egyptian backers), claims Mashamoun understatedly, while the RSF leader is deeply feared by the civilian side of the TSC.

For the regular Sudanese military, the RSF are useful as they perform tasks that they and the regime's key regional backers don't want to touch: internal repression and foreign military missions, respectively. For sending his RSF mercenaries to Libya and Yemen, Hemetti is handsomely rewarded by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, as are rank and file RSF forces by Hemetti, relative to an average Sudanese soldier's wage anyway. Afaf Hassan estimates that RSF forces that serve in Libya, Yemen or, as she claims, whom police the Saudi side of the Yemen border, can get more than \$500 a month; another Darfuri analyst has suggested that the true figure, depending on an RSF soldier's rank, can be as high as \$3,000 a month. Even rank and file RSF militiamen deployed at home get uniforms, money, a new car and a perceived status. Speaking to RSF who've served abroad, Afaf Hassan notes that it's possible to occasionally hear such private justifications as they're helping to defend *bilad Al-Haramain* ('land of the Two Holy Places'), but ultimately they fight abroad for cash. Such rank and file RSF fighters have stressed to her that they have no interest in killing Yemenis or Libyans.

As soon as Bashir was removed in 2019, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) gave a \$500m blank cheque to the Transitional Military Council that had immediately

taken over in his wake. The UAE and Saudi Arabia continue to have close relations with the Sudanese military. The Saudis to some extent hedge their bets between both Burhan and Hemetti by positively engaging with both, whether at a discreet senior military level, or with MbS publicly hosting. The Emiratis however are literally putting their money where they judge the real power to be: Hemetti, the head of the extant regime's praetorian guard. 'Everybody knows that the UAE wants Hemetti to be president,' said Jihad Mashamoun.

Hemetti had limited formal schooling and his early career in Darfur was as a camel trader; some would say camel raider. Marwa Gibril, an Anglo-Sudanese political analyst, dubbed him a 'warlord' during an [interview with William Morris on Radio Hala](#). In recent years Hemetti has invested in private English lessons and apparently deploys quite complicated English words. Hemetti's successful patronising of rebel groups drawn mostly from 'African' Darfuris included rhetorical (and, for many, deeply ironic) claims of uniting those from Sudan's historic periphery.

Hemetti is also the Sudanese leader receiving the greater financial and, more subtly, political support of these two leading Gulf Arab states for whom change at the top in Sudan completes their established efforts to bribe the state to strategically re-align. Sudan has moved from an alignment with Iran that for a period sat alongside a literal accommodation of Al-Qaida (pre-9-11); then, in the latter years of Saudi ruler King Abdullah, Bashir moved Sudan away from the Iranian embrace in favour of better Gulf Arab relations, albeit that the Saudis and Emiratis still had to stomach the ongoing Sudanese friendship with Qatar. The Saudi-Emirati drive to re-orientate regional 'client' countries reached its apotheosis with the opportunity brought by the fall of Bashir. The intimate connection had begun a few years earlier in Yemen and Libya. The Saudis had begun their leadership of the air war in Yemen in 2015, a concurrent lower level ground campaign involved the Emiratis (until 2019), together with soldiers from supportive i.e. needy Arab and other Muslim states. Hemetti happily traded several thousand RSF mercenaries for his Gulf patrons' money, and a residual Sudanese troop presence in Yemen seemingly continues. The RSF head has performed the same trade, bought with Emirati largesse, for a fight in Libya that favoured another military strongman and would-be state leader, General Haftar.

The Emirati-Saudi-Hemetti axis connects Libya, Yemen and Darfur

The deployment of Sudanese soldiers in Libya is also part and parcel of the security problem in Darfur, for which the non-Arab Darfuris have been the principal victims. A number of the Darfur rebel groups and Musa Hilal's SRAC were present in eastern Libya where they have been coordinated by UAE officers¹¹ in their fight alongside the Libyan rebel commander, General Haftar. This Emirati 'coordination' will no doubt have been accompanied by money and the supply of (largely western) arms. The Emiratis' role in funding Darfuri armed groups to fight with Haftar, just as they have encouraged Hemetti to send the RSF to perform the same role, dovetailed nicely with the UAE's role in helping to oversee the agreement of the JPA.

The UN has reported that, in addition to valuable revenue, these rebel groups' involvement in the fight to bring down the internationally-recognised government in Tripoli provided a territorial base for the weapons cache that that war has afforded them, in order to prepare for another possible round of fighting in Darfur¹². In advance of the planned disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration ('DDR') process envisaged under the JPA, the UN alleges that a number of Darfur rebel groups have been actively building up their weapons stocks in Libya to enhance their leverage in future political arrangement in Sudan. For Hilal's loyalists, Libya provided a good basis to build up financial and armed resources in order to try to take on Hemetti, including from within the RSF. The north-western Sudanese (including the Darfuri) border with Libya has provided relatively open access for a wide range of Sudanese forces to come backwards and forwards. According to Afaf Hassan, men and materiel from the Libyan conflict are a major factor in Hemetti's expansion of the RSF's armed capabilities. She says that there are a huge amount of weapons that have entered Darfur from the Libyan conflict and that these have been used by the RSF in Darfur.

The huge 'open border' between Darfur and Chad is also a large part of the threat to Darfur, says the anonymous Darfuri analyst. Chad is a major conduit for the outflow of arms from Libya. The Darfuri analyst argues that the flow of weapons from Chad into Darfur, and especially into El-Geneineh, has been 'massive over the last six months' as 'both sides' have sought to prepare for what they believe will be the armed consequence of Hemetti's leading authority in the TSC. 'Kalashnikovs are very easy to come by in Darfur,' the analyst says.

Jihad Mashamoun says that just as the recent violence in West Darfur had its historic roots in an established Arab-African ethnic struggle over land, so the Chadian government is prone to this divide too. The Zaghawa, Masalit and other non-Arab tribes have a large presence across the Darfur-Chad border, as do the Arab Rizaigat. Afaf Hassan states that Hemetti has good relations with the Chadian president Idriss Déby. Déby is from the non-Arab Zaghawa tribe. However his government is made up of both non-Arab and Arab elements, and it's argued by the anonymous Darfuri analyst that Hemetti has relatives in Déby's government. Along with the firepower, economic weight and close relations he has with several key Arab states, this presumably gives Hemetti leverage over Déby himself. However, either side in the Darfur struggle can acquire weapons from their ethnic allies in power in Chad. This free flow of arms across an open border has contributed to the violence in Darfur, and could easily destabilise neighbouring Chad too.

Libyan 'peace' could create more war in Darfur

It remains to be seen whether the February 5 2021 intra-Libyan peace agreement will oblige the Darfur rebel groups to end their presence there – as has supposedly been agreed for all foreign militias – and then to peaceably hand over all arms to the Sudanese authorities as part of the 'DDR' process envisioned in Sudan. Equally, any substantive progress in Libya could be the trigger for further conflict in Darfur, given that the situation in West Darfur and specifically El-Geneineh might ignite further confrontation in these areas, and this could, perhaps, be enjoined by fighters returning from Libya. While a number of these Darfuri fighters are from 'African' tribes other than the Masalit that predominate in El-Geneineh, their leaders' ability to remain part of the JPA framework could be tested by further repression in El-Geneineh, as elsewhere in Darfur.

The UN reports that armed groups made up mostly of Masalit, such as a JEM breakaway (the 'Sudanese Revolutionary Council') currently in south Sudan, remain outside the JPA. For this reason they have been courted by other Darfur rebel groups and by the RSF. This specific holdout group is, says the UN¹³, close to that of Abdel-Aziz Hilu, a Masalit with, unsurprisingly, sympathisers in West Darfur. As noted, members of his faction have expressed anger on social media at what has been happening in El-Geneineh. That said, on February 6 2021 Al-Hilu announced his group's unilateral 'cessation of

hostilities' would be extended until end-June 2021. Presumably armed groups in a posture of 'defensive' maintenance of extant territory outside of West Darfur would not want to face off with RSF forces such as those that oversaw the attacks and blockade on El-Geneineh.

Jihad Mashamoun says that Al-Hilu's 'constituency' is largely made up Nubian residents of the Nuba Mountains. Events in West Darfur are not intrinsic to his political base. Al-Hilu split from the SPLM-N because its leader Yasir Arman didn't insist in his talks with Bashir that the people of the Nuba Mountains would get a self-rule referendum. Al-Hilu then made a 'political trade', says Mashamoun. Al-Hilu got the Nuba's backing, and was consequently able to maintain the 10,000 SPLM troops who were loyal to him in this territory. (It also helped that he had grown up in the region)¹⁴.

Plainly, events in Sudan, and specifically the prospect for more violence in Darfur, have powerful domestic drivers. However the possible future direction of Libya emphasises how much arms proliferation in Darfur, and especially the amount of heavy weaponry held by the RSF, is reliant on foreign actors. Ditto the related Chad arms conduit.

The UAE and KSA are pivotal to Hemetti's control of Sudan

Looming large over much of this is the role of the UAE. As noted earlier, Abu Dhabi's principal Sudanese relationship is with Hemetti. This doesn't preclude the UAE from working with Hemetti's internal enemies to aid the struggle in Libya, and, in the case of Hilal, for Abu Dhabi to perhaps keep its options open given the ongoing intra-RSF power struggle. The Emirati-Hemetti relationship is though rooted in a number of areas of common interest. This may now mean reining in Hemetti's RSF as well as other Sudanese forces in Libya.

Having a bordering state led by a similarly-minded General was a shared strategic objective uniting both Hemetti and Burhan and the Emiratis and their Egyptian allies, with the Saudis in more distant support. This objective is by no means over. However, given the now overtly expressed US desire for an end to the conflict in Yemen, it may mean that Hemetti's trade in Sudanese mercenaries with the Saudis will have to end. While the Emiratis withdrew most of their military from Yemen in 2019, and have consolidated their alliance with southern Yemeni separatists, Hemetti's RSF have served a transactional role in countering the Iranian-backed Houthi, thus underscoring a common

interest that the real heart of the Sudanese regime has with its principal external allies. Just as Hemetti was once a security guarantor for Omar Al-Bashir, he is now positioning himself as a guarantor for the UAE and the KSA that Sudan's future political direction will be in keeping with their interests. With the power of their patronage and the importance of their relationships with key Sudanese neighbours, or key actors within those neighbouring states, the Emiratis and Saudis are pivotal to both what happens inside Sudan and in terms of its foreign policy.

Sudanese military acts against Ethiopia with Egypt's blessing

This doesn't prevent Sudan from asserting a perceived national interest, providing that it doesn't contradict what its key patrons are comfortable with. The Ethiopian leadership's pursuit of its internal conflict with the leaders of Ethiopia's formerly dominant Tigray Province from November 2020, saw Sudan, ironically perhaps, become the host of displaced Ethiopians: Tigrayans who had sought to escape the conflict by moving across Sudan's eastern border. The Ethiopian president, Abiy Ahmed, is in an assertively nationalist mode but one increasingly based on the specifics of Amhara territorial claims. This includes over territory (Falashga) that Sudan had previously agreed the provenance of with the then Tigrayan leadership of Ethiopia. Consequently the Sudanese military decided to drive out Ethiopian Amhara who had long been resident in the Falashga area but, in recent years, have resided there only on Sudanese sufferance. Sudan and Ethiopia have long held tense relations, for years, having sponsored each other's armed opposition. On this occasion it was the hapless Hamdoug who was left to try to ameliorate the conflict by engaging with his much more powerful Ethiopian counterpart, Abiy Ahmed. For the Sudanese military it had simply been a matter of asserting a once disputed border¹⁵.

The Sudanese armed forces would have been acting with the approval of Egypt, to which the post-Bashir Sudanese leadership has moved much closer, for example shifting its position in favour of US mediation over the Ethiopia's pursuit of 'GERD' (Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam). This was a naked bid to secure US approval, including for the lifting of 'terrorist' sanctions, and to try to isolate Ethiopia. Behind Egypt stands the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

It's noted by Mashamoun that Burhan received his military training in Egypt. Egypt is more comfortable dealing with the head of the Sudanese armed forces as *de facto* head of state and, given his (current) chairmanship of the TSC, Burhan is the nearest thing to a Sudanese *de jure* leader too. In terms of the wider security tie-up between the Sudanese regime and Egypt, it's notable, says the anonymous Darfuri analyst, that Bashir's former national security chief, Salah Abdullah Al-Ghosh, sits in Cairo and has NCP loyalists working for him. It's believed that Al-Ghosh was behind the failed military mutiny in Khartoum in January 2020.

Jihad Mashamoun emphasises that neither Burhan or Hemetti ever make reference to the disputed Hilaib Triangle, a British colonially-created anomaly whose nearly 8,000 square miles of territory Egypt largely administers but Sudan has long counted as part of its north-eastern 'Red Sea State'. Bashir used to stir up the issue for nationalist reasons; his successors are decidedly mute about the territory, observes Mashamoun.

The Burhan-Hemetti struggle

Burhan's willingness to allow Hemetti to regularly be the face of the real Sudanese regime, at home and abroad, in word and in deed, might be based on an assumption that if he gives him enough rope then this, seemingly unsophisticated former camel robber, will hang himself. However for the time being at least this isn't looking very likely. The RSF chief has become the embodiment of a new variant on the old regime, whereas Burhan is simply the embodiment of the old regime itself, shorn of its Islamist adornments. It's Hemetti who travelled to Qatar in late January 2021 in what at face value looked like a risky move, given the importance of the RSF chief's relationship with Qatar's primary regional rival, the Emiratis. Presumably the militia chief, who normally favours fatigues but arrived in Doha dressed in a sharp western suit, had informed his Emirati and Saudi patrons of his intentions. Saudi-Qatari relations are of course much improved of late, and the visit would not have happened before the much trumpeted intra-GCC 'reconciliation' signed off in Al-Ula at the start of 2021. The Emiratis were a key encouragement for the Darfuri groups signing on to the 'peace process' agreed in Juba in October 2020, while Qatar had been key to the last such attempted accord, back in 2006. It may be that Hemetti is seeking to play off external actors against each other in a bid to up his leverage. Making himself even more indispensable

when the UAE reportedly has retained links to his rival Hilal surely makes sense.

Why that UNAMID pull-out happened

The Gulf Arabs' support for Hemetti, and to a lesser extent Burhan, has been pivotal to West Darfur's lapse into violence and consequently to its non-Arab residents' desperate position. Furthermore the Emirati, Saudi and Egyptian embrace of the military side of the TSC emphasises that this is where the real power lies. Minni Minnawi, a leading JPA signatory, had urged, via the US chargé d'affaires that UNAMID not end its presence in Darfur at the beginning of 2021. However Burhan, supposedly carrying the weight of one able to effectively uphold the state's security capacity, blustered that the authorities were more than adequate to replacing the combined UN/AU force.¹⁶ The decision had been agreed by the UNSC and was seemingly considered an expression of faith in the Sudanese authorities who saw themselves as not only overseeing the transition but as making it a 'founding period'¹⁷ in which accountable state structures and, shortly, elected civilian government would predominate. The UN's support for the transitional Sudanese governmental structures, as embodied in its UNITAMS mission, remained in place, and continued working on 'peacebuilding' in the broadest sense.

However it seemed any doubt about the wisdom of the pull-out of international peacekeepers would somehow have been tantamount to doubting the determination of figures like PM Hamdoun. Wilfully naïve or intellectually-disinterested western representatives like UK Foreign Secretary Raab have focused on a symbolic expression of where they would apparently like power to lie in Sudan in the medium term, as opposed to where it has remained steadfastly rooted ever since Bashir was removed. Raab's late January proffering of aid monies was addressed to the Sudanese Premier as the apparent engineer of economic reform. Nothing was said about Darfur.

In August 2020 the US Congress passed Sudan ['fiscal transparency' legislation](#) that would in theory make the immense economic power of the Sudanese military (regular and irregular) more accountable and remove it from such non-defence related business activity as gold trading, something that ostensibly Hamdoun, and his new JEM-nominated finance minister, support. Yet the realities of state power in Sudan are such that internal security and the

maintenance and operation of Sudan's most pivotal, and generous, foreign relations are not in Hamdounk's hands or in the control of any part of the civilian component of the TSC, nor would they be under a titular civilian TSC chief.

The US legislation talks of 'civilian oversight' of the military; an arguably slippery phrase that could eventually be applied to the TSC. It says that a major, internationally-agreed, wipe out of Sudan's crippling public debt cannot occur without a civilian heading the TSC, a stance with which the UK would presumably concur. The officially planned appointment of that civilian TSC chief would only come at the military's behest, however, and that in itself wouldn't affect the power, and wealth, of the current vice-chairman, Hemetti.

Western diplomacy needs to get real

Unless western diplomacy recognises these realities, and either engages with the real locus of power in the Sudanese state, or states clearly why it is boycotting it, then governments like that of the UK are only emphasising their impotent irrelevance. That Burhan and Hemetti head a 'transitional' body that advertises, in plain sight, where political authority lies in Sudan, should make any other approach absurd. In security terms western governments, including those organised under the auspices of the EU, have engaged with the RSF as part of overall EU support for enhancing the capacity of the Sudanese security sector. Money and training have been provided by the EU to help Sudanese state bodies like the RSF control the migrant outflow from Sudan to Europe¹⁸. Hemetti is on record as demanding more money from the EU for the RSF's role in preventing migrant trafficking, while the regular armed forces have likewise demanded more resources for 'border control'¹⁹. Afaf Hassan alleges that Europe has in effect made a bargain with Hemetti to keep out unwanted migrants. That self-same RSF is playing the lead role in directing an internal political and security transformation in Sudan that aims to neutralise revolt but without addressing the political and security needs of vulnerable communities.

The appointment in early February 2021 of a new government under premier Abdullah Hamdounk emphasised that most of the Darfur rebels are now formally part of the government. They cannot any longer be called 'rebels' in meaningful political terms while their status creates confusion under international law given that their armed forces haven't yet been absorbed into

those of Messrs Burhan and Hemetti. However, while Minni Minnawi has been given the minerals portfolio, the gold is mostly in the hands of Hemetti and holdout rebel Al-Nur. Despite most pundits' predilection for talking of Bashir's removal as a 'regime change', sovereignty is not in the hands of the Sudanese people nor their would-be representatives, from Darfur or from anywhere else.

The 'coordination' of this new cabinet's 'activities and policies', said *The Sudan Tribune*, was and will be the result of Hamdoun working in consultation with the civil political groups, the SRF (mostly former Darfur rebels) and 'the military component'²⁰. It's the latter that hold sovereignty in Sudan; it's the military that enables Hamdoun to form a cabinet; and it's the military, and especially Hemetti, that have skilfully played most of the former Darfuri rebels who've joined a political process but do not hold substantive political power.

Few Darfurians would argue that UNAMID's role had ever been decisive – and Afaf Hassan noted that just over a year earlier a similar slaughter had taken place in Krinding camp near El-Geneineh. However the fact that the mass killings and targeted assassinations that took place in January 2021 occurred just two weeks after UNAMID's departure is surely an indictment of the assumptions of the UNSC member states who signed off on the decision. Afaf Hassan emphasised that the killings were made so much easier without such international witnesses.

In so many words the UNAMID pull-out decision suggested, without any supporting evidence, that Sudan could not only function as a viable and recognisable state, but that it could transparently organise a state's inherent monopoly force in the defence of all of its nationals. In practise a deep state militia, funded and politically backed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, was able to facilitate and then oversee yet another round of ethnic-sectarian slaughter in Darfur. The authority of the culpable militia leader is institutionalised in the formal position he has in the TSC, a position he holds precisely because he heads the RSF, and because of the political, security and economic weight that this therefore gives him. A UK national, Majed Hassan, has been murdered but no statement has been made by the UK Foreign Secretary about how or why. That HMG should maintain relations with a state's nominal but largely powerless civilian representatives but fail to either critically engage or roundly condemn Sudan's actual leaders who hold the most senior leadership positions, is absurd. Coupled with the indecency of having made no statement

about the assassination of a UK national, this is a deeply shameful situation for the British Government to be in.

A coda to the assassination of Majed Hassan and the killing of so many Sudanese in West Darfur in January 2021 is that a disproportionately high number of migrants seeking to enter the UK over the last year, usually via highly dangerous land and boat crossings, are Sudanese, and often from Darfur specifically. While historically UK governments of all stripes have found it hard to disregard some popular antipathy to migrants, the realities of life in some migrants' countries of origin, and even British post-colonial obligations, were long an important factor, along with the UK's own economic needs, enabling the legal right of some to settle in the UK or at least for their claimed refugee status to be given a fair hearing.

The rise in Sudanese making 'illegal' attempts to enter the UK requires the UK Government not just to look to its more generous past, but to examine today, in a hard-headed manner, whether its policy towards Sudan is actually encouraging the domestic repression that feeds such desperate attempts to enter the UK. In doing so it might be better equipped to properly honour the life, and acknowledge the death, of one of its nationals, and in the process forge a more realistic approach to Sudan than one based on the illusion of top-table 'influence' and accommodation of Gulf allies.

The author had been hoping that someone close to the Sudanese authorities would comment on the events in West Darfur and the wider political situation. However, sadly, no interview was forthcoming.

¹ Afaf Hassan is a Sudanese analyst and activist who holds Dutch nationality and UK permanent residency. Her 'Voices of Darfur Women' organisation promotes safe spaces for all Darfuri women

² 'UN Panel of Experts on the Sudan, sent to the President of the UNSC, and published January 13, 2021 (S/2021/40).

³ The SPLM –Al-Hilu militia is observing a unilateral ceasefire and is talking to the government

⁴ I am grateful to Eddie Thomas for laying out the political and economic context for the current situation in Darfur

⁵ See pages 64-66 of 'The Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan Between The Transitional Government of Sudan and The Parties To Peace Process' ('official English version')

⁶ 'Sudan Revolutionary Front rebels tour country to promote Peace Agreement', January 15, 2021, *Radio Dabanga* <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/>

⁷ UN Panel. *Op.Cit.*

⁸ See Point 44, page 16, from the report of the 'UN Panel of Experts on the Sudan'. *Ibid.*

⁹ See *Radio Dabanga* article <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/Hemetti-set-to-hand-jebel-amer-gold-mines-to-sudan-govt>

¹⁰ See <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudanese-govt-rejects-advice-of-juba-workshop-on-secularism>

¹¹ 'UAE officers work closely with Darfur groups in Libya: UN experts', *Sudan Tribune*, February 2, 2021; and, in more detail, in the UN Panel report *Ibid.*

¹² UN Panel *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Historically other SPLM leaders from the region had made the same commitment, said Dr Jihad Mashamoun: Al-Hilu 'inherited' his rank after his predecessors had died fighting the regime and, ultimately, he shared their commitment to a referendum.

¹⁵ I am grateful to the analysis of Alex de Waal whose article informed much of the preceding paragraph. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55476831>

¹⁶ See *Radio Dabanga* article <https://www.darfur24.com/en/2020/12/01/minawi-asks-washington-to-liaise-with-un-for-extension-of-unamid-mandate-in-darfur/>

¹⁷ 'Founding period' was a phrase used by Sudan's acting justice minister and was sourced by Tariq Othman in an article entitled 'Sudan: a new government that keeps pace with the aspirations of the street' published on the Arabic language Dubai (UAE) news site, *Al Bayan*, Jan 30, 2021.

¹⁸ See 'Border Control from Hell – How the EU's Migration partnership Legitimises Sudan's "Militia State"', Suliman Baldo, April 2017, *Reliefweb*

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/BorderControl_April2017_Enough_Finals.pdf

¹⁹ See for example page 10 of 'Border Control from Hell', *Ibid.*

²⁰ 'Hamdok (*sic*) forms Sudan's second transitional cabinet' February 8, 2021, *Sudan Tribune*.