

Repercussions of the Conflict in Sudan on the Situation in Yemen

Case Analysis

Political Analysis Unit

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Introduction

The fighting in Sudan between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces which broke in April 15 has raised regional and international concerns over the repercussions of the conflict on the region and on the hotbeds of conflict in the Middle East and North Africa.

The paper discusses the possible repercussions of this conflict on the situation in Yemen, at the military and security levels, as well as on the humanitarian and political levels, including its impact on the trajectory of political settlement in Yemen.

I. Repercussions on the political situation

In the context of its effect on the Yemeni scene and its repercussions on the political trajectory in Yemen, the conflict in Sudan poses challenges and opportunities. However, such opportunities and challenges, the most important of which are conditioned by other factors, remain modest and largely marginal. After all, the conflict in Sudan has its specific context, causes and dimensions, which make it different from the conflict in Yemen. The possibilities of this conflict having repercussions on the Yemeni peace process are further curtailed by the fact that it erupts at a time when fighting in Yemen has declined and peacemaking efforts appear to be oriented towards ending the war and enjoy unprecedented regional and international support, especially after the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In such a scene, regional actors and the international community are expected not only to protect the progress achieved so far in this path, but also to enhance it and build on it.

On the other hand, this conflict presents opportunities that are in the interest of the peace process in Yemen, through the incentives that it may create for dialogue and settlement. Given the concerns that it raises over the peace process in Yemen and the threats it poses, it may induce regional actors and the international community to intensify their efforts of ending the war. This may lead to exerting more pressure towards this goal. It also creates a common interest between regional and international actors to enhance stability and prevent further escalation. Two active conflicts at the same time means more instability in a volatile region, and hence poses a greater threat to international security.

Yet, according to some analysts, the conflict in Sudan also involves chances of weakening the political trajectory and declining financing and support for the peace process in Yemen. International actors may shift their focus to addressing the crisis in Sudan and this might lead to shifting diplomatic resources and political attention away from the peace process in Yemen.

However, the most likely negative consequence of this conflict is that it may make the Houthis more stubborn in negotiations with Saudi Arabia because the conflict in Sudan may weaken the capacity of the Sudanese troops in Yemen and Saudi Arabia to fulfill their obligations on the fronts where they are deployed. This means weakening the position of Saudi Arabia and its ability to secure its southern border, subsequently weakening its ability to exert pressure on the Houthi group. This outcome is the more likely if the Sudanese troops withdraw from Yemen and from the Saudi borders with Yemen in particular.

On the other hand, this conflict takes place about 300 km from the western coasts of Saudi Arabia and its main port, Jeddah. In other words, the conflict is not far from Saudi Arabia's most important giant modernization project (NEOM). This further weakens the Saudi position and compels Saudi Arabia, at least from the viewpoint of the Houthis, to make greater concessions in order to reach a peace agreement to ensure securing its southern front.

II. The military scene

The events in Sudan raise a question about the potential impact of the conflict on the military situation in Yemen. Any impact of the conflict in Sudan on the military scene will be channeled in one of two ways. The first is its impact on the position of Sudanese troops in Yemen and Saudi Arabia and the future of involvement of these troops in the Yemeni conflict. The second is its impact on military cooperation between Sudan and the Yemeni government.

Sudan participated from the outset in fighting the Houthi group under the banner of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and in support of the internationally recognized Yemeni government. Commander of the Rapid Support Forces and Deputy Chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council in Sudan, Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" at the time revealed that [30,000 Sudanese soldiers](#) participated in the war in Yemen. According to reports, most of these troops belonged to the Rapid Support Forces. This number makes Sudan the largest contributor to the coalition forces in terms of troops. The size of the Sudanese troops participating in the coalition operations [declined](#) over time. In late 2019, the Sudanese authorities announced cutting the number of Sudanese troops in Yemen from 15,000 to 5,000 soldiers. Sudan remained the most effective party in coalition operations after Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which made it an important partner in the conflict in Yemen.

As for the impact of the conflict in Sudan on the position of these troops, indicators show that any change in the position of these troops is unlikely. Although the issue of Sudan's participation in the Arab coalition operations in Yemen has been a controversial one in Sudan, it does not seem an issue of consequence today for both sides of the conflict.

On the other hand, both leaders of the conflict in Sudan, Al-Buhan and Hemedti, are linked to these troops. Both of them participated in [supervising](#) these troops and their involvement in the Yemeni conflict, but the nature of the connections of these leaders to the Sudanese troops in Yemen and the scope of their respective influence on them are not precisely known. Assuming that each of them retains his influence on these troops, it is unlikely that either of them will take individual steps towards withdrawal of the Sudanese troops. Their agreement on this issue is also excluded. In addition to the logistical difficulties involved in returning these troops to Sudan, the two sides still need to maintain good relations with Riyadh, and are cautious enough to avoid antagonizing the Saudis especially as the deployment of these troops is still important to the latter. Four brigades are deployed on the Saudi-Yemeni [border](#). Withdrawal of these troops risks provoking a dispute with Riyadh, as it may amount to an exposure of the Saudi border with Yemen.

There is also the position of the Sudanese troops in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Even if we assume that the loyalty of these troops to either party of the Sudanese conflict would be a sufficient motivation for their return to Sudan to participate in the fighting if instructed to do so, the temptations of staying are great. In fact, their stay means avoiding the difficult fighting in Sudan and retaining the benefits they get from the coalition countries, especially in view of the difficulty of getting a similar compensation in Sudan. On the basis of the foregoing, re-negotiating the obligations of the coalition countries towards obtaining some political or financial support remains the most important issue that any party to the Sudanese conflict may aspire to.

Moreover, this conflict might result in terminating the security and military cooperation programs between Sudan and the legitimate Yemeni government, a cooperation that has been strengthened over time. On December 21, 2022, the defense ministers of the two countries signed an additional agreement of military cooperation.

[Saba News Agency](#) and Sudan News Agency ([SUNA](#)) reported that the agreement came within the framework of promoting joint cooperation between the two countries in the fields of training, qualifying leaders and exchanging experiences, and aimed to provide support in peace operations, crisis management, anti-terrorism operations and marine piracy. [News reports](#) indicated that the agreement provided for the extension of the duration of presence of the Sudanese troops in Yemen and delegating additional troops. Some reports maintained that the presence and [participation](#) of the Sudanese troops in military operations will be in accordance with this agreement rather than under the banner of the Saudi-led coalition. Yet, it is difficult to verify the validity of information stated by such reports. At any rate, the disruption of such cooperation, an outcome conditional on the continuation of the conflict for a long time, by the legitimate government entails losing the advantages provided by this agreement.

Generally speaking, the conflict in Sudan is not expected to substantially impact the military scene in Yemen. The chances of withdrawing the Sudanese troops are tiny. If such withdrawal takes place at all, the outcomes will be restricted to granting the Houthis a moral victory and boosting their self-confidence. However, it may take place only at a time when the coalition field operations will have declined and the parties to the Yemeni conflict will have entered into a long truce that is similar to an unannounced end of the war, while the political trajectory will have been at its apogee and will be enjoying great momentum.

III. Security repercussions

Yemen, the region, and the world share common concerns over the repercussions of the conflict in Sudan. This conflict, especially if it spreads and goes on for a long time, may destabilize the region in several ways. Besides the threat it poses to international navigation, it will create more opportunities for violence and extremism. It may lead to a security void that may be exploited by terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, which may use Sudan as a base to launch attacks or recruit fighters for its operations in Yemen and elsewhere. It will also lead to the flourishing of smuggling operations and networks, including the smuggling of weapons and drugs, in a way that facilitates and increases the unlawful entry of these goods to Yemen. However, the threats represented by the conflict over the security of the Red Sea, international trade and the concerns it raises may push the regional actors and the international community at large to strengthen military presence and patrols in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which in turn can reduce opportunities of smuggling and piracy.

IV. The humanitarian conditions

This conflict portends a new humanitarian crisis in Sudan and the region. Such crisis can have dire consequences internationally not only because of violence, but also because of the complexity and deterioration of the [economic situation](#) in the country, a situation that already suffers from many problems, as shown by macroeconomic indicators. The economic measures taken by the Sudanese authorities after the overthrow of Al-Bashir's regime, led to devaluation of the national currency (447 pounds to US dollar), higher inflation rates and economic slowdown. GDP growth, for example, did not exceed 0.3% in 2022. This conflict will push Sudan towards a food crisis, the severity and scope of which will get worse in the case of a prolonged war, especially as Sudan already suffers from problems of food insecurity. In June 2022, the World Food Program announced that all areas of the country suffered from food insecurity, and that 15 million Sudanese face a severe lack of food security.

Coupled with the deterioration of economic conditions and a food crisis, violence will cause a major humanitarian crisis, which will in turn exacerbate the already deteriorating humanitarian situation in Yemen. The world will then have to face the new crisis, and this will put pressure on humanitarian resources and may result in cutting down the humanitarian assistance allocated for the crisis in Yemen, especially as those resources have dramatically declined in the past three years. On the other hand, the conflict in Sudan may disrupt the delivery of humanitarian aid and supplies to Yemen. One form of the humanitarian crisis that may result from the conflict in Sudan is related to displacement of civilians in Sudan. The war will lead to broad internal and external displacement, signs of which began to appear quite early, only after two weeks of the eruption of the conflict. The longer the conflict and the broader it grows; the more displacement will be. Yet, the possibility of receiving large numbers of displaced Sudanese civilians in Yemen remains weak, since Yemen is at any rate an undesirable destination for the displaced Sudanese civilians.

Conclusion

Although the conflicts in Sudan and Yemen take place in various contexts and have their peculiar causes and dimensions, it is possible that the conflict in Sudan will impact the Yemeni scene, though indirectly and only to a limited extent. It cannot cause a significant change in the calculations of the active forces in Yemen or in their positions. Although it may enhance the Houthi self-confidence and improve their negotiating position- for example,

it does not provide them with sufficient temptations or motives for military escalation. The chances of having a substantial impact on Yemen are especially weakened by the fact that the conflict in Yemen has entered a new stage in which violence has almost stopped and peacemaking efforts have great momentum and promising opportunities. The fact that Yemeni actors have not taken any biased or positions or emotional reactions towards the Sudan conflict indicates that the conflict in Sudan did not affect their positions or the strength of the political path in Yemen, and consequently testifies to the little impact of this conflict on the situation in Yemen.

At any rate, much of the repercussions and outcomes of the Sudan conflict hinge on the final outcomes and the duration of the conflict. So far, the situation is still nebulous. It is more likely that the situation will be characterized by a stalemate and that the conflict will go on for long, at least in light of the balance in fighting so far, which has shown that neither side is able to achieve any significant military breakthrough.



مركز أبعاد للدراسات والبحوث

Abaad Studies & Research Center

-  00967 737 887 778
-  00967 737 887 778
-  @abaadstudies
-  @abaadstudies
-  Abaad Studies & Research Center
-  مركز أبعاد للدراسات والبحوث
-  abaadstudies@gmail.com
info@abaadstudies.org

www.abaadstudies.org

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