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Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud held talks in Riyadh, on January 23, 2017, with Sudan's President Omar Hassan Al-Bashir. During the talks, both leaders discussed means of enhancing bilateral relations in various fields and reviewed the developments on regional and international arenas. Saudi King Salman and Sudan's President Al-Bashir attended the signing ceremony of a framework memorandum of understanding on the Kingdom's grant to finance a project for providing drinking water in rural areas.¹ This is the third visit of Al Bashir in Saudi Arabia within 6 months (July 1, 2016 and October 25, 2016).

In 2015, the president of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir has switched alliances, joining ranks with Saudi Arabia, after nearly two decades of strained ties. That means moving away from close relations with Iran, which has long used Sudan as a transit route for weapons shipments to armed groups in the region. As a part of the alliance, Sudan has cut diplomatic relations with Iran and joined the Saudi led coalition against the Houthi rebels in Yemen backed by Iran. In exchange Saudi Arabia granted \$5 billion in military aid to Khartoum in 2016.

Background for the Saudi Arabia – Sudan alliance

Since 1997, US-imposed sanctions on Sudan's central bank have weakened the country's access to global financial markets and hard currency. The Sudanese regime spends 70 percent of its budget on security and military functions to finance the ongoing conflicts between the Sudanese armed forces and rebel movements in Darfur and the provinces of South Kordofan and Blue Nile. The endless violent conflicts have drained resources and undermined investor confidence.

When the oil-rich South Sudan gained independence in 2011, Sudan lost one-third of its territory and Khartoum's oil production has fallen from 450,000 barrels per day to 100,000. The 2013-15, South Sudanese Civil War only worsened this trend. Therefore, the regime had to replace the revenue coming from domestic energy resources with external aid in order to survive.

For authoritarian governments, such as the Sudanese, budget security is fundamental, since it means regime security. The collapse of Sudan's economy and the rising popular discontent have pushed Bashir to shift from Tehran to Riyadh.

Sudan – Iran relations

Sudan and Iran share geopolitical objectives, and Sudan is a strategic gateway for Iran into the African continent. The alliance between Sudan and Iran was strong for decades and Iran supplied financial and military support for Sudan.

Iran helped Sudan in conducting military training and constructing an indigenous military-industrial complex for small arms and munitions, therefore contributing to upgrading the role of the military in the national economy. In 2008, Sudanese and Iranian officials signed a military cooperation agreement, and in 2013, Iran stepped up its construction of naval and logistical bases in Port Sudan.²

On the other hand, the Sudanese regime has delivered weapons to Iranian-friendly insurgent groups in Africa and the Middle East, including Hamas and the Houthis in Yemen, who are fighting Saudi-backed forces.

Sudan joined Riyadh's coalition despite having spent several decades strengthening ties with Iran. Since 2014, Sudan's relationship with Tehran took a new turn.

Perhaps early signs of Sudan's shift toward Saudi Arabia and the GCC — and away from Iran appeared in 2013:

In February 2013, Sudan and Saudi Arabia, had conducted their first joint naval exercise in Port Sudan in 2013.

In August 2013, the New York Times reported Khartoum had provided Syrian rebels that fought against Assad forces and his Iranian allies in Syria, with Sudanese- and Chinese-manufactured weapons via Qatar.

In September 2014, Sudanese authorities closed Iranian cultural centers in Khartoum and other locations, condemning Tehran's attempts to spread Shiism in Sudan. One month after the closures, Bashir sought to further distance Sudan from Iran, declaring that Riyadh's negative outlook on Khartoum's true relationship with Tehran was based on "false, fabricated and exaggerated" information.

In 2015, Sudan then broke diplomatic ties with Iran after Saudi diplomatic sites in Tehran and Mashhad were attacked following Saudi Arabia's execution of Shia cleric and activist Nimr al-Nimr.

Sudan and the war in Yemen

Sudan participates with about 2000 troops in the Saudi-led "Decisive Storm" coalition against the Iranian-allied Houthi militants in Yemen. The coalition includes United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan and Senegal.

The Sudanese air force

Sudan deployed at least three Su-24M strike aircraft to Saudi Arabia's King Khalid Air Base (Khamis Mushayt) in Saudi Arabia.

On April 1, 2015, Sudanese president Omer Hassan al-Bashir announced that the country's air force swung into action as part of the Saudi-led coalition against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. This was the first time Sudan spoke of actual airstrikes conducted by its air force in Yemen.³

Defense News magazine noted that Sudan acquired 12 Su-24 aircraft from Belarus in 2013 adding that the aircraft have been modified to the Su-24M export model by Belarus, according to the end-user certificate issued, and are fitted with two external fuel pods that would extend the range and loiter time over a target area. The operational range of the Fencer is a little over 600 kilometers.⁴

Moreover, the Sudanese Air Force has likely deployed some of its four C-130 Hercules and possible it's two Shaanxi Y-8 transports.

The ground forces

In October 2015, Sudanese Defense Minister Awad bin Auf said, "There are 6,000 fighters from special forces, ground forces and elite troops ready to participate when requested by the leadership of the coalition. ... Even if more troops and military contribution is needed, we are ready for any developments."⁵ Special operations advisers from Sudan have been deployed on October 4, 2015, in support of a Saudi-backed militia offensive launched in Yemen to seize control of Aden's airport. The Sudanese advisers were part of a Saudi-led team of 40 to 50 special operators that have led units of Yemen's Southern Popular Resistance pro-government militia to establish a beachhead at the airport for the arrival of more teams from Saudi Arabia.⁶

In October and November 2015, Assab port in Eritrea served as the logistics hub for the deployment of three Sudanese mechanized battalions to Aden. The two Sudanese battalions undertook a lengthy route movement from Kassala on the Sudan-Eritrea border to Assab port and were shuttled across to Aden by U.A.E. vessels.⁷

The Sudanese battalions arrived to Aden on October 17, 2015 equipped with BTR-70 armored personnel carriers. The Sudanese units assumed responsibility for security in Aden as UAE forces pulled back to their bases.

Aden became the seat of the Yemeni government earlier this year after the Shiite Houthis, based in northern Yemen, seized the capital Sanaa, and forced President Abdel Rabbo Mansour Hadi to flee to the south.⁸

The commander of the Fourth Military Region in the Hadi-allied Yemeni forces, Major General Ahmed Saif Muharrami, along with other army officers were seen greeting the Sudanese forces upon their arrival.⁹

"The vanguards of our ground troops have arrived in Aden to participate with the forces of the Arab alliance in the Decisive Storm operation. The participation of the Sudanese ground troops in the Saudi-led operation comes as part of the political commitment to the conventions and decisions of the Arab League to restore the legitimacy in Yemen", said the Sudanese army spokesman, Brig. Gen. Ahmed Khalifa El Shami.¹⁰

A third battalion made up of 400 officers and soldiers arrived on November 7, 2015, to provide security at al-Anad Air Base, bringing the country's Sudanese presence to a full two-thousand-man brigade.¹¹

A Yemeni army official has said that Sudanese troops deployed to Yemen were specialists in combat on mountain terrain and will be used to help liberate Ibb and Taz, both mountainous provinces.

On December 1, 2015, the Yemeni army began a large-scale military battle in order to reclaim al-Sharija area in the province of Lahij south of the country with the participation of units of the Sudanese army. In this battle, units of the Sudanese army are participating [for the first time] with members of the Popular Resistance with an air cover from the [Arab] alliance against Houthi militias and the forces of [former President Ali Abdullah] Saleh.¹²

The popular resistance in Taz, which has become the focal point of the conflict against the Houthis, said they welcomed the news that they would be reinforced by Sudanese soldiers. "We believe that the liberation of Taz is [only] a question of time and we want mountainous fighters to come to Taz as [the terrain] is not like Aden's – Taz needs fighters who can fight in mountains," said Moa'ath Al Yaseri, a leading figure in the Taz resistance.¹³

In January 2016 a Sudanese colonel was killed while fighting alongside the Saudi troops and pro-Hadi militias in the region of al-Waze'iya in the coastal province of Ta'iz.¹⁴

Joint exercises

The Navies of Saudi Arabia and Sudan have conducted in January 2017, their joint exercise, named "Falak 2", at King Faisal Naval Base, of the Saudi Western Fleet. Saudi-Sudanese relations have been reviving since 2015, due to a convergence of interests and the exercise comes at a time when bilateral ties between the two countries are witnessing remarkable development.

Exercise "Falak 2" is a part of the military cooperation between the countries. The Royal Saudi Western Fleet Commander, who is also the commanding officer of the exercise, Admiral Saeed Al-Zahrani, welcomed the participating Sudanese Navy mission in the exercise, as they arrived at Jeddah Port.¹⁵

The drills included storming and inspecting a ship to make sure that it does not smuggle weapons and landing on one of the islands carried out by speedboats with the participation of Royal Saudi Navy aircraft. The naval forces stormed a speedboat to prevent it from smuggling arms and ammunition in a mock drill. They also landed on an island as part of the security drill. Royal Saudi Navy aircraft took part in the exercise.¹⁶

In February 2016, Sudanese troops participated in the "North Thunder" military maneuvers in Saudi Arabia among 20 other Arab and Islamic nations.

The first joint exercise of the navies of Sudan and Saudi Arabia, took place in Port Sudan in 2013. Sudanese Army has revealed in February 2013, it is conducting joint maneuvers with Saudi naval forces in an attempt to promote collaborative action, combat maritime smuggling, and unify the common language between the two states, given Saudi Arabia's geographical proximity to Sudan. Two Saudi warships, along with members of the Saudi infantry and Marine Corps, are taking part in the exercises.¹⁷

Strategic dialogue

Admiral Majdi Sayid Umar, commander of the Sudanese naval forces at the Port Sudan base emphasized that the maneuvers were the first of their kind, and will be the beginning of greater efforts to safeguard the Red Sea basin and consolidate relations between the Republic of Sudan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.¹⁸

The Saudi Council of Ministers has agreed during its meeting, on November 16, 2016, which led by King Salman bin Abdulaziz, at Al-Yamamah Palace in Riyadh to authorize Crown Prince Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, or his deputy, to discuss with the Sudanese side a draft memorandum of understanding between the defense ministries of both countries, for cooperation in the military field.

Sudan and Saudi Arabia have held in Khartoum on December 26, 2016, high-level discussions on various aspects of military and security cooperation and coordination. The Sudanese side was headed by the Sudanese army's Chief of General Staff, Lieut. General Emad al-Din Adawi, while the Saudi side was chaired by the Saudi Chief of General Staff, Lieut. General Abdul Rehman Bin Saleh Al-Bunyan.¹⁹

The Royal Saudi Naval (RSN) forces

Saudi Arabia is the only regional force with the ability to maintain a truly blue-water-capable, war-fighting navy. However, the Royal Saudi Navy is in need of modernization. The majority of its fleet was commissioned

during the 1970s and 1980s and a large proportion of its vessels reaching the end of their useful service life.²⁰

The main naval headquarters located in the Saudi capital Riyadh with state-of-the-art command, control and communication center. The navy has one of the largest naval academies in the region, which is located in Jubail. The naval bases not only house navy ships, but also has one of the largest and most modern supply centers, naval schools, naval simulators and much more which make the Saudi naval bases the largest in the area if not the world.²¹

The operational command is divided into two major fleets plus command of the Marine regiment. The RSN Eastern Fleet is comprised of mainly US-built vessels, although the Western Fleet is mainly sourced from France.

The Arabian Gulf Division (The Eastern fleet) is headquartered at Al Jubail and has bases at Dammam, Ras Tanura, and Al Qatif, plus a naval aviation element.

The Red Sea Division (the western fleet) is headquartered at King Faisal Naval Base in Jeddah and has bases at Yanbu, Naval Station in Jazan Province and Algathimah near Jeddah. The Western Fleet includes seven French built frigates:

Four French F-2000 frigates (2,870 tons), each armed with a Dauphin helicopter, eight Otomat antiship missiles having a range of 160 kilometers, torpedo tubes, and a 100mm gun.

Three al-Riyadh-class frigates that have been modified from the French La Fayette-class frigate. They are fully loaded at a displacement of 4,725 tons, are armed with eight MBDA Exocet MM40 Block II surface-to-surface missiles (SSM), two eight-cell Sylver vertical launch systems for the Eurosam (MBDA and Thales) Aster 15 surface-to-air missile (SAM), the main gun is the Oto Melara 76 mm/62 Super Rapid while there are four 533 mm aft torpedo tubes.²²

The Western fleet is taking active part in the war in Yemen against the Houthi pro- Iranian rebels.

The Saudi Navy has a Marine Corp of 3,000 soldiers, their Amphibious Warfare ships are four LCUs and two LCMs.

Summary

Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud seeks to unite the Sunni Arab world behind the kingdom to counter Iranian influence. Riyadh sees Sudan as an actor in this foreign policy strategy. Indeed, Sudan — an Arab League and African Union member situated along the strategically prized Red Sea — plays a unique role in the Middle East's geopolitical order.

Regime survival is the main concern for Bashir as Khartoum reaches out to the Gulf Arab states to mitigate the risks associated with the country's worsening economic crisis. The price Sudan pays for this financial lifeline is participation in Yemen's civil war.

The Sudanese military participation in the military campaign in Yemen and the Islamic alliance reconciled Omer al-Bashir's regime with the Saudi government, and marked the divorce with Iran.

Sudan is the only country outside the Gulf region directly participating in the ground campaign against Houthi rebels. Khartoum's army has a lot of experience fighting unconventional foes during which it earned a special reputation for brutality.

Notes

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- ¹ Sudan's Bashir visits Saudi Arabia, holds talks with King Salman, Al Arabiya, January 23, 2017.
- ² Giorgio Cfiero, Sudan gets \$2.2B for joining Saudi Arabia, Qatar in Yemen war, Al Monitor, May 28, 2015.
- ³ Sudanese planes pound Houthi targets in Yemen, Sudan Tribune, April 2, 2015.
- ⁴ Sudanese planes pound Houthi targets in Yemen, Sudan Tribune, April 2, 2015.
- ⁵ Giorgio Cfiero, Sudan gets \$2.2B for joining Saudi Arabia, Qatar in Yemen war, Al Monitor, May 28, 2015.
- ⁶ Once Iran's ally, Sudan sends advisers for Yemeni offensive Iran opposes, McClatchyDC, May 5, 2015.
- ⁷ Saudi Arabia Confirms Arrival of Sudanese Troops in Yemen, TELESUR, October 17, 2015.
- ⁸ Hundreds of Sudanese troops arrived in Aden More Sudan forces arrive in Yemen, Dabanga, November 10, 2015.
- ⁹ Saudi Arabia Confirms Arrival of Sudanese Troops in Yemen, TELESUR, October 17, 2015.
- ¹⁰ Sudanese ground troops arrive in Yemen, Dabanga, October 19, 2015.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Sudanese troops engaging Houthi rebels in Yemen for the first time: report, Sudan Tribune, December 2, 2015.
- ¹³ Mohammed Al Qalisi, Sudanese mountain troops 'to help liberate Ibb and Taz' in Yemen, October 22, 2015.
- ¹⁴ Sudanese Colonel Killed in Clashes with Yemeni Troops, FARS News Agency, January 10, 2016.
- ¹⁵ Saudi Arabia, Sudan start joint Naval Exercise, named "Alfalak 2", Emirates News Agency, January 13, 2017.
- ¹⁶ Joint Saudi-Sudan Naval Exercises: Falak 2, Asharq Alawsat, January 17, 2017.
- ¹⁷ Ahmed Younis, Saudi, Sudan Hold Joint Naval Maneuvers, Asharq Alawsat, February 19, 2013.
- ¹⁸ Ahmed Younis, Saudi, Sudan Hold Joint Naval Maneuvers, Asharq Alawsat, February 19, 2013.
- ¹⁹ Sudan, Saudi Arabia Hold Joint Military Discussions, National Yemen, December 26, 2016.
- ²⁰ Naval modernization crucial for Saudis, The Arab Weekly, May 8, 2016.
- ²¹ Abdulateef Al Mulhim, Gulf Shield 1 showed Saudi preparedness, Arab News, October 11, 2016.
- ²² Ibid.

