



Sudan Prepares for Major Military Operations to Divert Focus From Growing Internal Unrest

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Executive Summary

- The escalating fuel riots in Khartoum, and increasingly in other cities in Sudan, serve as a stark reminder of the inherent fragility and instability of the country. The Bashir Government attributed these fuel price hikes and the ensuing shortages to a fiscal crisis made worse by the shortage of hard currency.
- However, the oil crisis is unfolding and escalating at a time when Khartoum is spending huge sums of hard currency on advanced weapons, mainly weapon systems optimized for long-range strikes and major wars rather than handling insurgencies such as the never-ending insurgency in Darfur. In recent months, Khartoum has embarked on an unprecedented military build-up, mainly of its air power. Taken together, these efforts point to active preparations for a major land war rather than mere escalation of the fighting against irregular forces in Darfur or elsewhere in Sudan.
- Khartoum needs a major diversion of the popular anguish and frustration. Addressing external threats is a proven diversion from internal crises. Khartoum considers a host of crisis and friction points with South Sudan emanating from the mid-2011 break-up of Sudan as the potential catalyst for the sought-after eruption for the besieged Bashir Administration. Khartoum is driven by the grim realities of the region, and Bashir's determination to get involved in crises with assertive offensive strategy. Hence, Khartoum's saber rattling and war preparations might prove self-fulfilling.

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ANALYSIS

The escalating fuel riots in Khartoum, and increasingly in other cities in Sudan, serve as a stark reminder of the inherent fragility and instability of the country.

The riots were sparked by the spiraling prices of all fuel products following the abolition of subsidies and the growing shortages of all fuel products. Moreover, the recurring shortages of fuel have resulted in shortages of food and other products and goods brought into Khartoum from both the Red Sea ports and the countryside. Within a few days, the riots became the worst since the 1989 riots which led to the military coup which brought Omar al-Bashir to power.

The economic and social riots are increasingly political. For example, the headquarters building of the ruling National Congress Party was set on fire. "What began early this week in Sudan as a protest against the removal of fuel subsidies has developed into a full-blown uprising that is threatening President Omar Hassan al-Bashir's 24-year rule," Arab political observers warned on September 27, 2013.

As the Khartoum riots escalated and turned political, the Sudanese military was sent to the streets to crack-down the riots by force. By September 27, 2013, the Sudanese Government acknowledged that more than 50 demonstrators were killed by the security forces; more than 250 were wounded, and more than 600 were arrested. Numerous opposition sources put the casualty numbers in Khartoum alone at more than 150 fatalities, more than 750 wounded, and more than 2,000 arrested and/or disappeared.

The military's violent crackdown in Khartoum sparked even bigger and more violent riots during the weekend throughout Sudan. The protesters are now openly demanding the overthrow of Bashir's Government while calling Bashir himself "a killer". Moreover, both the Sudanese Government and Arab diplomats report a growing use of automatic weapons by the rioters starting the evening of September 27. On the morning of the September 28, 2013, four security personnel were shot and killed in Khartoum by unidentified gunmen in the ranks of the rioters.

Significantly, the Bashir Government attributed these fuel price hikes and the ensuing shortages to a fiscal crisis made worse by the shortage of hard currency.

However, the oil crisis is unfolding and escalating at a time when Khartoum is spending huge sums of hard currency on advanced weapons, mainly weapon systems optimized for long-range strikes and major wars rather than handling insurgencies such as the never-ending insurgency in Darfur.

In recent months, Khartoum has embarked on an unprecedented military build-up, mainly of its air power. The key weapon systems are being purchased from Belarus. Most important is the acquisition of 12 refurbished Su-24Ms (four to six of them already supplied) and 18 refurbished Su-30MKs (originally leased by India from Russia but returned to Belarus for the legal reason that the Russian Air Force cannot operate them).

Sudan was also negotiating the acquisition of another batch of secondhand Su-25s to augment the existing fleet of 11 Su-25s (out of 14 originally purchased from Belarus). Belarus has a large arsenal of high-quality combat aircraft which was put on sale for hard currency. A total of 35 to 36 Su-24Ms were withdrawn from service in February 2012, and the remaining 22 to 23 Su-24Ms are available for purchase. As well, 17 Su-27P and 4 Su-27UBM1 fighters were withdrawn from service in December 2012 and also put for sale. The Belarus Air Force also has around 20 Su-25s stored in Lida.



Khartoum expressed interest in virtually every major combat aircraft available and the main lingering issue is the availability of hard currency.

Sudan is also looking for additional MiG-29s which Belarus cannot offer. Sudan acquired numerous MiG-29s in the last decade. In late 2008, 23 of the MiG-29s were in active service. However, only 11 of these MiG-29s were operational in the first half of 2013. One MiG-29 was claimed by the South Sudanese air defenses on April 4, 2012. Apparently, the aircraft crash-landed in a Sudanese airbase and was written off. The other 11 MiG-29s were grounded due to maintenance difficulties. Sudan is interested in a large number of MiG-29s and the main candidate source is Ukraine, which has around 100 MiG-29s of various models stored in reserve.

The most important undertaking by the Sudanese Air Force in recent months has been the large scale recruitment of mercenaries — aircrews, technical experts and ground crews — from all over the former Soviet Union. Their main mission is to activate, upgrade, and better utilize the existing arsenal of the Sudanese Air Force (which had suffered both combat and technical damage in recent years). The first visible result is the growing number of MiG-29s which are taking off for test and evaluation flights. The efforts of the ex-Soviet mercenaries have already returned four to six additional MiG-29s to flying status.

The revamped Sudanese Air Force has unprecedented long-range reach, covering northern Ethiopia and all of nemesis South Sudan. Indeed, the Sudanese Government is also committing huge resources to the upgrading and expansion of all key military airbases in the southern parts of the country, including the extension of paved runways and the construction of new buildings, bunkers, and other facilities.

Meanwhile, the Sudanese Government is making strenuous efforts with Russia to expedite and increase the deal for assault helicopters and helicopter gunships. On order are 12+6 Mi-8T and 12+6 Mi-24D/V/P. Although Khartoum is ready to pay cash for everything, the Kremlin is not rushing the deal for political-strategic reasons. Again, the Sudanese acquisition of weapon systems is accompanied by the widespread recruitment of mercenaries — aircrews, technical experts, and ground crews — to get Sudan's existing arsenal of 20 Mi-8/Mi-17 assault and 24 Mi-24 combat helicopters into better operational status, and to ensure highly-qualified aircrews in the cockpits.

Although the main emphasis of Khartoum is air power, the expansion and modernization of the ground forces has not been neglected. The current priority of Khartoum has been launching a concentrated effort to fully operationalize and activate the large quantities of heavy weapons (tanks and artillery) purchased from Ukraine in 2009-2010 and delivered over the succeeding couple of years. The main weapon systems are T-72 MBTs, BM-21 MRLs, 152mm 1S3 SPGs, 122mm 2S1 SPGs, and 122mm D-30 guns. As well, the Sudanese Army has embarked on the refurbishment and modernization of key military bases and garrisons in southern Sudan, including the installation of modern communications systems.

The Sudanese military build-up effort received a major boost on September 9, 2013, during the visit of Libyan Defense Minister Abdel-Rahman al-Thani to Khartoum. Sudan Defense Minister Abdel Rahim Hussein signed an agreement with his Libyan counterpart for the large-scale purchase of weapons, spares, and ammunition, mainly from Qadhafi's stockpiles in southern Libya. In return, Sudan promised to restrain Libyan *jihadists* who had sought and received shelter in Sudan, and to prevent them from returning to Libya. (The Sudan-Libya agreement is identical to the agreement signed with Egypt in 2001.)

The supplies from Libya would also enable the Sudanese military to activate and return to operational use a sizeable force of older models of Soviet-origin weapons.



Taken together, these efforts point to active preparations for a major land war rather than mere escalation of the fighting against irregular forces in Darfur or elsewhere in Sudan.

Khartoum needs a major diversion of the popular anguish and frustration. Addressing external threats is a proven diversion from internal crises. The calls for the reunification of Sudan under the banner of Islam have been a popular rallying cry for the widespread Islamist and Mahdist constituencies, and thus a sure method for getting their supporters out of the swelling ranks of rioters. Moreover, it is also expedient for the Bashir Administration to blame the oil crisis and shortage of funds on the lingering impact of the transfer of so many oilfields to South Sudan after the mid-2011 break-up of Sudan.

Ultimately, Khartoum is driven by the grim realities of the region, and Bashir's determination to get involved in crises with assertive offensive strategy. Irrespective of reassuring political rhetoric, Sudan and South Sudan are heading toward a major face-off which might easily escalate into violence. Abyei remains a volatile region with tension growing as a result of Sudan's strenuous suppression of grassroots revolts in surrounding South Kordofan.

The Abyei crisis should be expected to persist since the referendum is nowhere to be seen. Khartoum considers the Abyei oil reserves a shortcut to addressing the economic catastrophe and therefore refuses to accept the secession which the local population has demanded. The road to war from such irreconcilable quandary is very short. Abyei is not the only crisis point, given that the South Sudan-Sudan border demarcation as proposed by the AU is equally problematic and destabilizing, and thus might provoke crisis and war at any moment.

Furthermore, even though Cairo is currently focused on domestic issues in the aftermath of the military take-over, the crisis with Ethiopia over the Nile waters lingers and is far from resolution. Dominance over the Nile waters is a sacred cause for both Egypt and Sudan, and thus no government in Cairo or Khartoum would ever allow itself to be portrayed as having compromised with the Nile Basin states. However, the new military-led Government in Egypt has reversed the policy of the previous Government of Mohammed Morsi and has reverted to an approach which favors a diplomatic/negotiated solution on Nile waters. But thus far, with no viable solution in sight, and with the work on the Ethiopian Millennium Dam continuing (albeit at a now reduced rate), the crisis might still escalate into a major war. South Sudan would be dragged into such a war by regional geography.

Thus, each of these are ticking crises in their own right, as well as good causes for diversion and tension building for the besieged Bashir Administration. Hence, Khartoum's saber rattling and war preparations might prove self-fulfilling.

Little wonder that South Sudan is considering its own military build-up, as declared on September 22, 2013, by the new South Sudan Defense Minister, Kuol Manyang. Juba is determined to build a strong national army even if such undertaking might take nearly half of the national budget allocation. Manyang explained that Juba wants "the army to be at full military readiness to ensure victories in any military engagements". Juba's "strategic vision" calls for the building of "a strong and professional force" in regional terms. Manyang stressed that Juba's ultimate objective was to deter the eruption of wars and crises, but that "the army, anywhere in the world, can only avoid wars when it is capable of winning them".



Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State. He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports. Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



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