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Chad-Sudan Relations and the Qatar Crisis

Eline Rosenhart

Following the June 2017 decision of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt to cut ties with Qatar, many more countries have been pressured to take a stance on the Qatar issue. Even African countries are now getting drawn into this crisis, in which Qatar is condemned for its close ties to Iran and is accused of supporting terrorism. The most recent example is Chad, which has taken a firm anti-Qatar stance. On 23 August 2017 Chad's foreign minister Hissène Brahim Taha announced that Chad would be closing the Qatari embassy in N'Djamena and that its diplomats would have ten days to leave the country.¹ Its neighbor Sudan, on the other hand, has professed neutrality and has urged both sides to reconcile.²

The reasons for these decisions by both countries find their roots in the Darfur conflict and Chad's recent civil war (2005-2010). This article aims to assess the current state of affairs between Chad and Sudan. It will first provide an overview of the fluctuating relations between Chad and Sudan, from Chadian President Idriss Déby's rise to power in 1990 until the current Qatar crisis. How has the Darfur conflict influenced relations between Chad and Sudan? What was Qatar's role in the Darfur conflict and in the Chadian civil war? Could the Qatar crisis have a negative effect on the relations between Chad and Sudan? These are questions this article aims to answer.

¹“*Le Tchad Accuse le Qatar de ‘Tentatives de Déstabilization.’*” *Radio France Internationale*, 23 August 2017.

² Giorgio Cafiero. “Qatar-GCC Crisis Unsettles Sudan.” *Al-Monitor*, 20 June 2017.

Sudan and the Chadian Regime

The Presidents of Sudan and Chad, Omar al-Bashir and Idriss Déby, are both military men and both came to power by military *coup d'état*. Omar al-Bashir did so in Sudan in 1989. In that same year, former Chadian President Hissène Habré suspected that the commander-in-chief of the army, Idriss Déby, was planning to topple his regime. Déby managed to escape from the hands of Habré and fled to Darfur, part of the homeland of his people, the Zaghawa tribal group.³ From his exile in Sudan, Déby plotted to overthrow Habré. He was assisted in his attempt by members of the Zaghawa, as well as a far more powerful player: the government of Omar al-Bashir. With support from the Sudanese security apparatus, Déby came to power in a coup d'état on 2 December 1990.

At the beginning of his presidency, Idriss Déby took steps to consolidate his power and neutralize threats to his rule. He did this by eliminating rivals and forging a complex network of patronage alliances with members of the Zaghawa and with a number of loyalists from other tribal groups, the former forming the core of his regime's power base. One of the family members who gained a particularly influential position was Timan Erdimi, Idriss Déby's nephew.⁴ However, some Sudanese Zaghawa who had militarily supported Déby returned home after the coup and began to employ their skills of warfare against the government of Sudan.⁵

The Darfur Conflict Begins

The Darfur conflict began in July 2001, when a group of rebels consisting of men from the Zaghawa and Fur tribal groups forged an alliance and swore to act against the Arab supremacist policies of Khartoum, which had resulted in attacks on Darfurian villages.⁶ In 2003, the rebellion against the Sudanese government consisted of two movements: the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). Key positions in these movements were held by Zaghawa. The Sudanese government responded to the insurgency with a heavy hand and

³ The Zaghawa are a semi-nomadic tribal group of African descent that inhabits eastern Chad and western Sudan including Darfur. Although Sunni Islam is their official religion, the Zaghawa have kept many pre-Islamic traditions. Their language is also called Zaghawa.

⁴ Waldari Wa Akhbaara. "*Le Tchad S'Innotise (Liste des Itnos qui Occupent des Postes Importants)*." Independent Blog. n.d., Accessed 4 September 2017. http://waldar.over-blog.com/pages/Le_Tchad_sitnotiseliste_des_Itnos_qui_occupent_des_postes_importants-3943188.html

⁵ Roland Marchal. "Roots of the Darfur Conflict and the Chadian Civil War." *Public Culture*, Vol. 20 No. 3 (2008), p. 432.

⁶ Julie Flint and Alex de Waal. *Darfur: A New History of a Long War*. (London: Zed Books, 2008), pp. 81-87.

used the infamous Janjaweed militia⁷ to brutally crack down on the uprising in 2003, which was later defined as genocide by the International Criminal Court. For this reason the Court issued an arrest warrant for Omar al-Bashir in 2009, in which he was indicted for crimes against humanity.

The situation in Sudan confronted Déby with a strategic dilemma. On the one hand, he did not want to act on behalf of his tribal group, the Zaghawa, because he was indebted to the Sudanese regime for helping him to power. On the other hand, he would weaken his leading position within the Zaghawa by not coming to the aid of his kinsmen. Déby's initial choice not to intervene on behalf of the Zaghawa in Darfur – and in fact to send his troops to fight against them in March-April 2003 – proved to be costly for the stability of the country and his regime.⁸ A referendum on a proposed constitutional change, according to which Idriss Déby would be allowed to run for a third term and change the parliament into his puppet, was also not received with favor by many Chadians.⁹ Members of Déby's own family, and of the wider Zaghawa tribal group, turned against him during the early years of the Darfur conflict and formed rebel groups aspiring to overthrow the Chadian government.

In 2005, Déby made a dramatic reversal in policy. He began to support the rebels in Darfur to save his own position. The government of Sudan, in turn, lost its trust in Déby and backed the rebel groups attempting a coup d'état in Chad. Thus, the Darfur conflict spilled over into Chad and provided the sparks that blew up into a brutal civil war, which began in 2005.

Chad and Sudan: From Proxy War to Rapprochement

Several different rebel groups were formed against Déby's regime in 2005, among them defected members of the Chadian military. Many of these movements were based in Sudan. In April 2006, a group of rebels managed to reach N'Djamena. After a day of heavy fighting with the Chadian army, the rebels withdrew. In an interview on Chadian national radio the next day Idriss Déby called the failed coup a “programmed threat on Chad” by the Sudanese government.¹⁰ However,

⁷ The name of the Janjaweed militia is most likely derived from the Arabic words *jinn* (spirit) and *jawad* (horse), which loosely translates into “devil on horseback.”

⁸ Jérôme Tubiana. “Renouncing the Rebels: Local and Regional Dimensions of Chad–Sudan Rapprochement.” *Small Arms Survey*, March 2011, p.11.

⁹ Marco Boggero. “Darfur and Chad: A Fragmented Ethnic Mosaic.” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 27:1, p. 24.

¹⁰ Radiodiffusion Nationale Tchadienne, 14 April 2006.

he denied that it had been a rebellion from the inside. In the same broadcast he announced the severance of ties with Sudan and the closure of the mutual border.¹¹

After this diplomatic breakdown, the Chadian civil war and the Darfur conflict turned into a proxy war between the governments of Déby and al-Bashir. Déby continued to support Darfuri rebels, while al-Bashir backed different guerilla movements in Chad, including the Union of Resistance Forces (URF), headed by Idriss Déby's nephew Timan Erdimi.¹² Several outside players attempted to reconcile Chad and Sudan and to promote the peace process in Darfur. One of the main countries involved in this mediation process was Qatar, which aimed to enhance its reputation as an important regional player. In 2009 the Sudanese government and the JEM signed an agreement of goodwill in Doha. A few months afterwards, N'Djamena entered into a renewed reconciliation agreement with Sudan under Qatari mediation. Even though this agreement was not initially successful, the following year Chad and Sudan made concrete efforts to restore their relations. The government of Omar al-Bashir benefitted greatly from Qatari support in this peace process and also received substantial financial aid from Qatar and other Gulf states.

Recent Chad-Sudan Relations and the Qatar Crisis

Ever since the normalization between Chad and Sudan in 2010, their bilateral relations have improved greatly. Both countries not only ceased to financially and militarily back each other's rebel movements, but also formed a bilateral peace-keeping force to prevent insurgents from crossing the mutual border. Both countries also refused to provide shelter to rebel leaders wanted by the other country. Sudan, for instance, expelled URF leader Timan Erdimi in 2011, and Chad has refused to allow JEM leader Khalil Ibrahim to enter N'Djamena.¹³ Also recently, Chad and Sudan have been improving their cooperation on issues such as border security, counter-terrorism and economic relations.¹⁴

Yet the Qatar crisis could potentially unravel the Chad-Sudan rapprochement of recent years. Chad has accused Qatar of supporting rebel movements that threaten its regime, after rebels

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Tubiana. "Renouncing the Rebels," p.22.

¹³ "Sudan hands over two rebels to Chad - Timan Erdimi." *Sudan Tribune*, 24 May 2011.

¹⁴ "Sudan, Chad Agree to Continue Dialogue On Joint Issues." *AllAfrica.com*. 22 August 2017; "Sudan's Al-Bashir, Chad's PM Discuss Border Security." *Sudan Tribune*. 23 August 2017; "Al-Sudan Wa-Tchad Yabhithan Subul Dafea Al-Taeawun Al-Iqtisadi Wal-Istithmari Baynahum." *Youm7*, 23 August 2017.

attacked a Chadian army patrol on the border with Libya on 18 August 2017.¹⁵ Not only did Chad denounce Qatar for providing support for Chadian rebels in Libya, but it also accused Qatar of providing asylum for one of Chad's most wanted rebel leaders – Timan Erdimi. Though Chadian foreign minister Hissène Brahim Taha denied that its current rift with Qatar is connected to the regional Qatar crisis,¹⁶ Chad did recall its ambassador from Qatar when the Qatar boycott erupted in June as a stance of “active solidarity with Saudi Arabia.”¹⁷ Additionally, Chad has recently been on excellent terms with Egypt. Egyptian President ‘Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi visited Chad in August 2016 and offered “all needed assistance” to Idriss Déby's regime.¹⁸

Sudan, however, has thus far preferred to stay neutral on the Qatar issue. On the one hand, it has lately been “repairing” its relations with the United States after twenty years of sanctions were lifted by President Barack Obama in January 2017, a decision which is currently under review by the Trump administration. It has also tried to remain on good terms with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states by militarily backing the Saudi intervention in the Yemeni civil war in exchange for financial aid. On the other hand, Sudan has also received billions of dollars in aid from Qatar over the last few years and has benefitted from Qatar's mediating role in the Darfur conflict. Qatar's aid has allowed for the survival of al-Bashir's regime in the face of insurgencies in Darfur, South Kordofan and the Blue Nile regions.¹⁹ It remains to be seen if Sudan will maintain its neutral position in this crisis. Sudan's relations with Egypt have been deteriorating and reached a low point in May 2017, when Sudan accused Egypt of supporting Darfurian rebels against the Sudanese regime and of providing them with arms.²⁰ Also, al-Bashir has been facing mounting internal pressure to back Qatar.²¹

As the region is becoming more and more polarized on this issue, the Qatar crisis could entail a turn for the worse in Chad-Sudan relations. Both Déby and al-Bashir fear for the stability of their

¹⁵ "Tchad: Violent Combat au Nord Près de la Libye Avec les Forces Spéciales." *Alwihda Info*, 19 August 2017.

¹⁶ "Tchad-Qatar: Timan Erdimi, Rebelle Tchadien au Cœur de la Brouille Diplomatique." *Radio France Internationale*, 24 August 2017.

¹⁷ Madjiasra Nako and Joe Bavier. "Chad Recalls Ambassador from Qatar Amid Gulf Arab Row." *Reuters*, 8 June 2017.

¹⁸ "Egypt Is Willing to Provide All Assistance to Chad: Sisi." *Ahram Online*, 17 August 2017.

¹⁹ Cafiero. "Qatar-GCC Crisis Unsettles Sudan."

²⁰ "Sudan's Bashir Accuses Egypt of Supporting Darfur Rebel Attack." *Sudan Tribune*, 24 May 2017; Walaa Hussein. "Al-Sisi Fi Jawlat Ifriqiya Lil-Hashd Didd Qatar... Wal-Sudan Yatahadaa Al-Qahira." *Al-Monitor*, 17 August 2017.

²¹ "Sudanese Opposition Party Declares Support for Qatar." *Middle East Monitor*, 13 June 2017.

regimes in the face of foreign assistance to insurgency groups on their respective borders. At the same time, both regimes are also dependent on foreign support to retain power. If Sudan decides to back Qatar in this current crisis, it could have major consequences for its relations with Chad. If the Qatar crisis is permitted to come between Sudan and Chad, it could further erode the already tenuous balance in this conflict-ridden arena.

Eline Rosenhart is a research assistant at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies and an M.A candidate in the Department of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University. Her thesis research focuses on North Africa, Chad-Sudan relations and the Darfur conflict.