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## Dimensions of the Russian military base in Sudan

**Dr. Badr Hassan Shafei**

The Sudanese foreign policy has recently witnessed significant changes to achieve its interests. The map of alliances with neighboring countries after the secession of South Sudan indicates that there is a state of tension with some parties, including Egypt, Chad, and Haftar in Libya. However, there is a remarkable improvement of relations with Ethiopia at the expense of Sudan's historical relationship with Egypt. On the other hand, Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir severed diplomatic relations with Iran in solidarity with Riyadh, and sent six thousand soldiers to Yemen within the framework of the Saudi-led Arab coalition's Operation Decisive Storm against the Houthis. Despite his country's casualties, about 500 soldiers, Al-Bashir did not receive the billions of dollars that Al-Sisi received although he refused to participate in the operation.

In the recent Qatar blockade crisis, Sudan adopted a neutral position despite the tension it may cause in its relationship with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. However, there are reports that Sudan may even withdraw from Operation Decisive Storm for its close ties with Doha which played an important role in the Sudanese political reconciliation as well as the reconstruction of Darfur.

Internationally, Al-Bashir has so far succeeded in blocking activation of his International Criminal Court arrest warrant of 2008. Moreover, he led Africans together with Kenya's current President Uhuru Kenyatta through the African Union to denying recognition of the ICC. On the other hand, Sudan opened its doors to the rivals of the United States - which imposed sanctions on his country more than two decades ago – namely, Russia and China. During the Obama administration era, Al-Bashir

cooperated with the US in the file of terrorism and the pacification in Darfur, making Obama lift the sanctions on Sudan partially. This put Trump in a deadlock at the renewal time in October 2017, prompting him to lift sanctions except for the export of arms and Darfur issue while maintaining the status of Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism.

However, al-Bashir surprised everyone - during his first visit to Russia in November 2017 - by asking the Russians to establish a military base on Sudanese territory - overlooking the Red Sea - to protect his country from the US threats that are targeting the division of Sudan to five countries.

Sudanese Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Ghandour tried to explain this later, pointing out that the move came in response to the negative stances of some Western countries, not just the United States, against Sudan since 1990 on the one hand, and for the positive stances of Russia and China towards his country in the Security Council on the other. It is noteworthy that Russia and China aborted last year a US draft resolution to ban the Sudan's exports of gold, even though it is the first export commodity after oil fields went to South Sudan after secession. The Sudanese foreign minister added that his country's move towards Russia does not mean that it adopts an anti-US stance, as the policy of alliances has ended in international relations, as he said.

However, the statement of Sudanese foreign minister raises questions like: Why has Sudan remained silent throughout this period (since 1990) towards the US and Western threats to Khartoum which eventually led to the secession of the south? Is there new information that make al-Bashir and his foreign minister to recall the plan to divide the country into five provinces?

This makes us wonder about the connotations of the timing of this step, and the motives of the decision?

### First: Timing connotations

The idea of the military base has been on the table since 2012, and the Russians were then more enthusiastic about it, especially during the visit of the Sudanese Assistant President Dr. Nafie Ali Nafie to Moscow, who also discussed with the Russian officials ways to develop military relations, rehabilitate the Sudanese armed forces, provide them with modern armament systems, and support Sudan's Air force and air defense. It is known that Moscow is the first supporter of Sudan in the field of armaments in light of the latter's strained relations with the United States. The political and military relations of the two countries have witnessed a remarkable development most of the time, especially after the independence of Sudan in 1956, and the visit to Khartoum by the Soviet Union President Brezhnev in 1961.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Sudan recognized Russia as its heir in 1991. Moscow was the first supplier of weapons during the war in southern Sudan. Russians also trained Sudanese army commanders and soldiers, by allowing them to join Russian military colleges. Sudan was also granted permission to manufacture Russian weapons under Egyptian names. In the area of arms sales, Moscow was the main source of weapons to Sudan, which gave the Sudanese forces a comparative advantage in the face of armed movements inside the country, as well as deterrence of foreign forces. Sudan obtained the Russian Mirage-29, which served as a strong wall of deterrence, both in preventing air attacks on Sudan by some countries and in the destruction and shelling of targets and weapons of the rebellion forces on the ground.



The Sukhoi 25 fighter played an important role in reaching the Darfur rebels while hiding among the civilians, for the accuracy of the monitoring process, as well as the bombing and destruction of weapons coming to rebels from neighboring countries, including Libya during the Gaddafi era, and Chad during the days of tension between the two countries.

Sudan has received a batch of the Russian Sukhoi 35 fighter immediately before Sudanese President's latest visit to Moscow, as the first Arab country to obtain it. Sukhoi 35 is expected to protect the skies of Sudan and impose a defensive shield that cannot be defeated easily. The Russian fighter competes with the sophisticated American counterparts of F-15, F-18, and F-35.

*Despite all this, the question remains about the timing and Al-Bashir's motives.*

The announcement of the military base came about a month after the lifting of the US sanctions on Khartoum, and a week after the visit of US Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan to Khartoum, in which he expressed optimism about lifting Sudan from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism, although he declined to meet Al-Bashir and only met with his first deputy Bakri Hassan Saleh. This means that Al-Bashir was supposed to wait a little while, because announcing such a move could provoke Washington which might re-impose sanctions or continue to include Sudan in the list of countries sponsoring terrorism.

## **Second: Sudan motives**

There are several motives or interpretations for Al-Bashir statements at this particular time, including:

1- Al-Bashir may have some concerns over the possibility of Trump's re-imposition of sanctions on Sudan.

2- The Sudanese president may have wanted to send a message to Washington that keeping his country on the lists of countries sponsors of terrorism will make it move towards allying with Moscow, which may motivate the United States to contain Khartoum and remove its name from the lists of terrorism.

3- Al-Bashir may have received confirmed information related to the revival of the issue of dividing Sudan into five separate countries, especially in the presence of Haftar in Libya, Al-Sisi in Egypt, and Kiir in South Sudan, in light of the growing separatist conflicts in the world, including Kurdistan in Iraq, and Catalonia in Spain.

4- Rewarding Russia for its positions supporting Sudan in international forums. This move by Sudan's Al-Bashir aims at benefiting from Moscow as an umbrella in international forums for supporting Sudanese issues, as it did with Iran in its nuclear file, and with Bashar Al-Assad in the Syrian crisis.

5- The Sudanese president may have wanted to send a message to both Egypt and Saudi Arabia – as they are all overlooking the Red Sea – in light of the apparent tension in relations with both of them recently due to the siege on Qatar, and Halayeb and Shalatin crisis. Therefore, Al-Bashir specifically chose the Red Sea for suggesting the establishment of the Russian military base.

It may be feared that this move is part of the competition with Cairo, which has already concluded a \$ 3.5 billion deal with Moscow for buying defense systems in 2014, and has recently allowed Moscow to establish a military base by 2019, according to media reports.

What is strange about Russia's position towards the Sudanese offer is that it did not show the due enthusiasm towards the issue. Russia just announced that it would consider this offer, despite its tireless efforts to re-enter Africa after its withdrawal after the fall of communism.

### Third: Repercussions of the announcement

We have two possibilities in this regard:

a) The whole issue should be viewed within the context of sending messages:

- To Washington for the acceleration of lifting sanctions on Sudan completely,
- To Saudi Arabia for maintaining investments in Sudan, and
- To Egypt for easing escalation against Khartoum.

b) That these statements may be serious. Here they may have a range of implications, including:

1 - Establishing a foothold for Russia in the Red Sea which used to be an Arab lake in the past before the emergence of Israel and independence of Eritrea. Perhaps this will lead to a kind of new cold war between Moscow and Washington which regards the Red Sea as one of the traditional strategic areas under its control.

2 - A possibility of forming a tripartite alliance of Sudan, Russia, and Iran, where Moscow is expected to work for the resumption of relations between Khartoum and Tehran. Undoubtedly, formation of such coalition will be at the expense of Sudan's relations with the Gulf countries, especially the Qatar-siege countries: Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

3- This raises another question about the reaction of the United States and whether Washington will re-impose sanctions against Sudan again. In this case, will Moscow be able to help the Sudanese economy, especially that Russia and China had refused to schedule or drop some of Khartoum's debts before.

4- For the Darfur crisis, Russia's heavy presence and armament would lead to the inability of the rebels who have not joined the peace agreement to achieve concrete military results on the ground unless Saudi Arabia and UAE provided more support

through their proxies: Haftar in Libya, Deby in Chad, and Silva Kiir in South Sudan – after any likely rapprochement between Tehran and Khartoum.



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