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From Benghazi to Darfur: How Libya's Haftar is helping to fuel Sudan's war

Strongman Khalifa Haftar has become an indispensable part of the RSF's war effort in Sudan, smuggling fuel and weapons at the expense of Libya's own economy

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Mustafa Fetouri (/taxonomy/term/74695) | 25 November, 2025

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As Sudan's devastating war drags into another year, it is increasingly clear that Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) has become an indispensable part of the Rapid Support Forces' (RSF) war (https://www.newarab.com/analysis/how-fall-el-fasher-could-cement-sudans-partition) against the Sudanese army.

Haftar's network supplies fuel, facilitates weapons, and helps sustain the RSF's war economy (https://www.newarab.com/analysis/drones-gold-and-proxy-powers-new-phase-sudans-war) - a shadow supply line draining Libya's public coffers of billions. According to World Bank data, Libya loses (https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099140012122442510/pdf/IDU13d87be7a1b0ad14a82193fc16a5f1106fc61.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com) at least $5 billion annually to fuel smuggling alone.

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Haftar’s engagement with the RSF is not merely opportunistic; it is calculated, reflecting a mix of economic, political, and strategic considerations. By controlling key eastern and southern corridors, he is both a gatekeeper and profiteer, benefiting from the fuel and arms flows that sustain the RSF.

Acting as a proxy for the UAE (https://www.newarab.com/analysis/blood-and-business-israel-uae-nexus-fuelling-sudans-war) - his long-time ally - he assumes risk on Abu Dhabi’s behalf while balancing relations with Cairo, another patron of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). So far, he has kept both sides happy.

In April 2023, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, SAF commander and Sudan’s de facto head of state, said Haftar personally phoned (https://en.alwasat.ly/news/libya/396435) him to deny any connection to the RSF. Yet five months later, the UN Panel of Experts on Libya confirmed (https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/234/61/pdf/n2323461.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com) to the Security Council that air transport had been used to support RSF operations from Libya.

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The army has since escalated accusations that Haftar’s LNA directly supported RSF attacks (https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudanese-army-retreats-libyan-border-after-alleging-haftar-attack-2025-06-11/?utm_source=chatgpt.com) in the Libya–Egypt–Sudan border triangle (https://www.newarab.com/analysis/rsf-its-doorstep-could-egypt-enter-sudans-war), framing it as part of a “foreign-backed conspiracy” led by the UAE. Khartoum asserts that it documented (https://apnews.com/article/sudan-rsf-uae-weapons-colombia-mercenaries-war-a696a7a451bb69354d6943c452106bc0) Colombian mercenaries that were allegedly recruited by the UAE and flown to Benghazi, before heading to Sudan.

A leaked UN expert report raises similar concerns, describing (https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/apr/14/leaked-un-experts-report-raises-fresh-concerns-over-uaes-role-in-sudan-war?utm_source=chatgpt.com) a “regional air bridge” of frequent UAE-to-Chad

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cargo flights with irregular patterns suggesting covert operations. The UAE strongly denies (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/9/uae-denies-supplying-sudan-paramilitaries-with-chinese-arms?utm_source=chatgpt.com) supplying Chinese-made howitzers to the RSF.

By late 2023 and into 2024, activity around Haftar's eastern strongholds raised sharper questions among diplomats and UN investigators. Cargo flights between the UAE and eastern Libya have prompted several governments to privately warn that Haftar was serving as a logistical bridge for the RSF.

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Publicly, neither Burhan nor Haftar escalated their rhetoric, with the Sudanese army chief only noting that Haftar had "denied all involvement" in their April 2023 call. Haftar, meanwhile, maintained that eastern Libya was unfairly linked to Sudan's war.

However, a UN Panel of Experts and Western intelligence documented signs of a widening RSF-Haftar relationship, including medical treatment for wounded RSF fighters in Benghazi and suspected weapons storage at al-Khadim airbase.

As is usually the case, such operations are hard to prove, but the gap between Haftar's denials and accumulating evidence set the stage for Khartoum's explicit accusations in 2025.

If Haftar is the RSF's logistical artery, the UAE is its financial and political engine (https://www.newarab.com/analysis/blood-and-business-israel-uae-nexus-fuelling-sudans-war). Abu Dhabi's backing predates the current conflict, but since April 2023, it has expanded into a sustained wartime supply effort, partially relying on eastern Libya.

More than 60,000 civilians have been displaced in El-Fasher since the RSF seized the city, the final urban centre in Darfur under the army's control. Around 2,000 civilians were massacred during the fighting. [Getty]

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UN investigators and intelligence assessments indicate that the UAE supplies weapons, fuel, and equipment through airstrips under Haftar's control - notably Al-Khadim and Benina - arming the RSF (https://www.newarab.com/analysis/massacres-rape-plunder-rsfs-spiral-violence-sudan) while avoiding direct attribution.

This has elevated Haftar from local strongman (https://www.newarab.com/analysis/new-king-haftar-dynastys-challenge-libyas-future) to crucial middleman in a regional proxy network, granting leverage over both Abu Dhabi and Khartoum. By turning his territory into an extension of the UAE's Sudan strategy, Haftar now wields influence far beyond his formal political status in Libya.

Investigative reports (https://thesentry.org/2025/11/13/80846/inside-job-libyas-leaders-directly-behind-multibillion-dollar-fuel-heist/) indicate Haftar's LNA have allegedly helped smuggle Libyan subsidised diesel and gasoline that sustain RSF mobility and operations in Darfur. The fuel flows may form part of a quid pro quo, with Haftar's camp benefiting politically and financially in return for advancing the UAE's Sudan agenda.

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Eastern Libya is not the only route the UAE uses to supply the RSF. Chad has been the preferred route for heavy weapons, while Libya remains preferred for fuel and other goods smuggling. Fuel smuggling is no longer a peripheral side business but a core pillar of RSF support.

Haftar's son and deputy, Saddam, visited (https://libyaupdate.com/saddam-haftar-in-kufra-inspects-service-projects-and-issues-directives-to-complete-1500-housing-units/) Kufra - on the Libya–Sudan frontier - in April and November 2023 during a southern tour, making sure everything is going according to plan. The visits combined public mobilisation for the LNA with the logistical supervision critical to sustaining RSF operations.

The RSF's access to weapons and drones underscores the multilayered nature of external support. According to Amnesty International, Chinese-made GB50A guided bombs and AH-4 155 mm howitzers were documented in RSF operations in Darfur, "almost certainly

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Amnesty notes (https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/sudan-advanced-chinese-weaponry-provided-by-uae-identified-in-breach-of-arms-embargo-new-investigation/?utm_source=chatgpt.com) these weapons were deployed via Wing Loong II and Fei Hong 95 drones, systems supplied to Haftar and previously used in Libya in 2020, demonstrating continuity in UAE-Haftar military collaboration.

Human Rights Watch's 2024 report on the war in Sudan corroborates this pattern. Amnesty further confirms that eastern Chad, particularly Amdjarass airport, serves as a transit point for weapons and ammunition bound for the RSF.

Beyond the battlefield, Sudan has sought to challenge external support for the RSF through legal channels. In March 2025, Khartoum filed a case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) (https://www.newarab.com/analysis/why-sudan-launching-icj-genocide-case-against-uae) accusing the UAE of violating the Genocide Convention by arming and backing the RSF, particularly highlighting atrocities in West Darfur.

In May 2025, the ICJ dismissed the case, ruling it "manifestly lacks" jurisdiction due to a reservation the UAE entered upon ratifying the Genocide Convention. The court did not address the merits of Sudan's allegations. As the ICJ emphasised, procedural barriers can prevent judicial assessment of whether a state's actions constitute complicity in atrocities.

Haftar's engagement with the RSF is not merely opportunistic; it is calculated, reflecting a mix of economic, political, and strategic considerations. [Getty]

The ruling underscores a critical reality: despite mounting evidence of UAE support for the RSF - through logistics, fuel, and arms channels - legal accountability at the international level faces structural limits.

Observers note that the dismissal leaves Sudan with few avenues to contest foreign involvement in its conflict, even as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch document cross-border transfers and sophisticated weapon systems fuelling RSF operations.

In this context, Haftar's network in Libya and Chad takes on added geopolitical significance. It is not simply a conduit for fuel and arms; it is part of a multinational support architecture whose effects are reinforced by legal impunity, leaving the RSF better equipped and the Sudanese state constrained in responding to foreign-backed incursions.

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Notably, US attention to the conflict has shifted following high-level engagement. After meeting Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the White House, President Trump acknowledged that Sudan was not on his "charts" before MbS explained (https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-announces-us-making-new-effort-end-war/story?id=127683382) the situation.

He later reaffirmed his commitment in a speech (https://www.newarab.com/news/trump-vows-end-sudan-atrocities-saudi-princes-request) at the US–Saudi Investment Forum, signalling a potential proactive US role. This opens a diplomatic avenue for Envoy Massad Boulos to engage the UAE, Haftar's networks, and other regional actors to curb the flow of weapons and fuel sustaining the RSF's operations.

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The Trump administration, including Secretary of State Rubio and envoy Massad Boulos, is aware of which external actors are sustaining the RSF in Sudan. While Rubio stopped short of naming states, he emphasised after the recent G7 meetings that the US knows (https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/11/secretary-of-state-marco-remarks-to-the-press?cmplz-force-reload=1763982918864) "who is providing support" and is monitoring the situation closely.

Trump's public acknowledgement of MbS's briefing and his promise to act signal that Washington can no longer ignore the UAE's role. For proxies like Haftar, this heightened scrutiny may limit operational freedom, even if immediate sanctions remain unlikely.

For the UAE, the main consequences are reputational and diplomatic exposure, as its RSF support is now under international observation. Major US actions, such as sanctions, are improbable given the billions committed by the Emirates to Trump-linked investments (https://www.newarab.com/analysis/trump-familys-lucrative-middle-east-business-empire), a matter of personal importance to the president.

Still, public attention, diplomatic pressure, and ongoing monitoring mark a shift: while the conflict continues, those sustaining it are increasingly visible and accountable on the international stage.

Mustafa Fetouri is an award-winning Libyan journalist, columnist, author, and translator, with contributions to major outlets like Middle East Monitor, Al-Monitor, and Washington Report, and a focus on North Africa and the Sahel region

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