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Libya, Chad and Sudan – An Ambiguous Triangle?

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This paper wants to shed light on the relations between Libya, Chad and Sudan in the last three decades, relations, which were characterized by wars, tensions and interventions, but also by alliances, assistance and investment. It also wants to focus on a Dafurian rebel movement, the JEM, and its interrelation to the three states. Further, the paper will show how the uprisings in Libya and Gaddafi's fall affect its two neighbour-countries in the south. The information presented here is based on fieldwork conducted in the three countries between 2003 and 2007, mainly in Tiné, a border town along the Chadian-Sudanese border and the hometown of the ethnic group of Zaghawa. Further information raised from fieldwork conducted in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan between 2009 and 2011 and from analysis of different reports and articles as well as from personal conversations with members of the Zaghawa.

Libya and Chad

A series of popular revolts have spread in the Arab world along the Mediterranean coast since December 2010. Protests took place in several countries in the region, starting in Tunisia and Egypt, reaching Libya and other countries shortly after. The outbreak of the revolt in Libya in February 2011 that ended with the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime occurred at a time when relations between Libya and Chad had tightened with both countries forming an important coalition in the region.¹ However, the relations between the two countries had not always been that friendly.² During the presidency of Hissène Habré, who was president of Chad between 1982 and 1990, the relationship between the two countries was hostile and marked by several military interventions. The situation changed only after President Idriss Déby took power in 1990 and after Libya had dropped all territorial claims in the country generally changing course towards an improvement of political relations with his neighbor. Between 1990 and 2005 Gaddafi acted jointly with President Idriss Déby in order to normalize relations and to bring peace to northern Chad.

When in 2005 the situation in eastern Chad deteriorated due to the emergence of different Chadian rebel groups, consequently Gaddafi turned himself into a regional powerbroker, acting as mediator between Chad and Sudan and playing an active role in the peace negotiations between Chad and various rebel movements.³

Chad and Sudan

Before we come back to Libya, let us look at the relations between Chad and Sudan. The current leaders of Sudan and Chad, Omar al-Bashir and Idriss Déby, both took power by force at about the same time, al-Bashir in 1989 and Déby in 1990. Déby overthrew his former mentor, Hissène Habré, operating from North Darfur where he was

¹ International Crisis Group 2011: 1.

² Berg 2008: 33-34.

³ Hansen 2011: 4; International Crisis Group 2011: 1.

mainly supported by the Sudanese Zaghawa and Bashir, who had recently seized power in Sudan.

The Zaghawa are an ethnic group with about 180.000 members living in an area spreading across the border between Chad and Darfur and located more than thousand kilometers away from the three capitals Khartoum, N'Djaména and Tripoli in a power vacuum where illegal border crossings and smuggling are widely common. The Chadian President Idriss Déby himself is from the Zaghawa tribe and with his presidency the Zaghawa community consolidated its grip on power in Chad.⁴ Also in Sudan some influential positions were held by Zaghawa.

Before 2005, Déby was a loyal partner of al-Bashir, because al-Bashir had supported him in taking over the power in Chad. In 2003 insurgencies started in Sudan and with them the Darfur conflict. At that time, Déby was unable and – even though only on a hidden agenda – unwilling to stop the two armed opposition movements in Darfur, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), from using Chad as a rear base, recruiting soldiers from his army and getting support from the Chadian Zaghawa.⁵ Both rebel groups, the SLA and especially the JEM, were mainly composed of Zaghawa.

In March and April 2003, Déby wanted to help Bashir fighting the SLA and the JEM and sent Chadian troops to Darfur via the border town of Tiné. By that time I had arrived in Tiné to start my research on Trans-Saharan trade, so I was able to observe the military movements across the border. Not surprisingly, the Chadian soldiers – mainly Zaghawa themselves – showed little motivation to fight against other Zaghawa and, instead, gave the rebel movements advance warning of the planned attack by the Chadian army. It seemed that a number of weapons and munitions remained in Darfur at that time as well. Déby consistently refused to directly support to Sudanese rebels, even though the rebel leaders were closely linked to his family, but he did not do anything against the movement of weapons, munitions and people to the rebels. And despite the tensions created by this indirect Chadian support of the opposition groups in Darfur, the Chad-Sudan relations remained good until 2005.

In that year different rebel movements in Chad emerged with the goal to overthrow Déby. At this point, Bashir changed policy and started to support these new Chadian armed opposition groups, a step which became clearly visible, when a Chadian rebel group attacked a Chadian border town. This group had arrived from Darfur backed by the Sudanese government. Déby responded by increasing his support to the Darfur rebels.⁶

While the rebel groups in Darfur denounced the marginalization of their region, the Chadian rebels railed against the political supremacy of the Zaghawa in Chad, because Déby's clan had concentrated power and wealth in Chad in its hands since 1990. This anti-Zaghawa discourse motivated most Chadian rebel groups to oppose Déby. However, Déby also faced a Zaghawa opposition group led by Timan Erdimi, a nephew of Déby

⁴ Marchal 2006: 46.

⁵ Tubiana 2011: 11.

⁶ Tubiana 2011: 16-17.

and former chief of staff in the Chadian government, who had fallen out with his uncle.⁷ At that time, Déby thus had not only different Chadian rebel groups against him, but also parts of his family, and there were several attempts on his life by closest family members.

In April 2006 and in January 2008, two separate attacks on N'Djaména marked the heights of this proxy war between Chad and Sudan. On both occasions Chadian rebels – supported by Sudan – found their way to the capital trying to overthrow President Idriss Déby. Déby managed to overcome both challenges, but only with the support of France and with the help of rebel movements from Darfur, especially with help of the JEM.⁸

The raid on N'Djaména in 2008 marked a turning point in the relations between Chad and Sudan, but also between Déby and the rebel groups in Darfur. Up to then, Déby had only supported the JEM indirectly and inconsistently, which had left the JEM in a precarious military position on many occasions. But when N'Djaména was under attack in February 2008, the JEM was worried Déby could fall and with him their Chadian support. The rebels therefore decided to leave their good position in West Darfur and race some thousand kilometers to N'Djaména to help Déby. However, they arrived too late as Déby had already defeated the Chadian rebels – but with the support of French troops only. JEM then assisted Déby in chasing the Chadian rebels back to Sudan. This helped the JEM to regain Déby's trust. Déby provided the JEM with vehicles and weapons and also allowed the group to re-establish rear bases on Chadian territory.⁹

In May 2008, relations between Chad and Sudan further deteriorated to an unprecedented low, when the JEM left their bases in Chad and in Darfur, crossed over a thousand kilometers to Khartoum and conducted a spectacular raid on the Sudanese capital. For Sudan, this attack looked like a direct response to the February 2008 attack on N'Djaména and that is why Sudan interpreted it as an act of revenge by Chad.¹⁰ It remains unclear whether Chad was directly behind this attack or not. Although Chad denied any involvement, Sudan immediately broke off diplomatic relations.¹¹

Both sides continued to use the rebels of the other country as instruments in their proxy war. Khartoum supplied the Chadian rebels, N'Djaména the Sudanese rebels, especially the JEM. Curiously, there were Zaghawa rebels on both sides of the conflict now, namely the Sudanese rebel groups the JEM under Dr. Khalil Ibrahim and the SLA operating from Chad and the Chadian rebel group of the UFR (Union des Forces de la Résistance) with Timan Erdimi as leader operating from North Darfur.¹² Both, Dr. Khalil Ibrahim and Timan Erdimi are closely related to Déby, the first being supported by Déby, the latter opposing the Chadian president.

⁷ May & Massey 2007: ii; Tubiana 2011: 13.

⁸ Tubiana 2011: 17; Giroux et al. 2009: 1.

⁹ Tubiana 2011: 19-20.

¹⁰ Tubiana 2011: 18.

¹¹ Tubiana 2011: 21.

¹² Small Arms Survey 2010b: 1; Tubiana 2011: 23.

By the end of May 2009 both governments realized that the military options had failed.¹³ In the rapprochement between Chad and Sudan, Déby was in an especially difficult situation, because there were still many Zaghawa in his government sympathizing with the JEM while he was trying to gain the trust of Khartoum. Déby then removed many Zaghawa from their offices in N'Djaména and filled their positions with other people. He thus surely lost much trust among his own tribal family. In August 2009, first talks between Chad and Sudan were held in Tripoli with Gaddafi's support and an agreement was signed in January 2010.

When the rapprochement reached the ground, pressure mounted on the JEM and border crossings became more difficult.¹⁴ Afterwards, Déby stiffened his policy and banished the JEM from Chadian territory. In May 2010, JEM members and their leader Khalil Ibrahim were seized at N'Djaména airport and then expelled to Libya, where Khalil remained until September 2011; he left the country again after the Libyan uprising and went back to Darfur.

Libya, Chad and Sudan

Now we come back to Libya. Since 2003 Libya had been able to strengthen its position as a regional powerbroker and it actively facilitated the contact between N'Djaména and Khartoum in 2009 in order to prevent a direct war between the two regimes, which would have had disastrous consequences for the wider region.

Libya's financial means and regional authority brought the two leaders to the table, but Gaddafi did little to assist the realization of the agreements. The lack of coordination between Libya and other peace initiatives led to a contest for influence, which allowed the leaders to play the several mediators off against each other. Gaddafi's efforts in Chad had helped him only a little to re-establish himself on the international stage. His involvement in Chad rather intensified the impression that Libya's policy remained ambiguous.¹⁵

Libya and Sudan

What about the relations between Libya and Sudan? Between 1967 and 1971 Libya and Sudan maintained good relations due to the fact that both countries pursued a policy of solidarity with other Arab countries. However, during the early 1970s the Sudanese President Nimeiri began to shift foreign policy towards Western powers, a move which again conflicted with Libyan interests. Consequently, relations between Sudan and Libya deteriorated and military inventions followed irregularly. Especially in the late 1970s and 1980s Sudan and Libya clashed over several regional conflicts.

After al-Bashir took power in 1989, the relations between Sudan and Libya improved, but always remained ambiguous until they finally aggravated again in 2008, when JEM

¹³ Tubiana 2010.

¹⁴ Tubiana 2011: 27-28.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group 2010: 1-2.

fighters crossed the desert to Khartoum to attempt to overthrow the president. Although the JEM still received support from Chad at the time, Sudanese newspapers claimed that Gaddafi had supported it financially. It is indeed believed that Libya funded the purchase of between 300 and 350 Land Cruisers, which were probably used in the attack.

After Chad denied JEM's chairman, Dr. Khalil Ibrahim, the entry and put him back on a flight to Tripoli in May 2010, Khartoum requested his extradition, but Gaddafi refused to hand him over. In response, Sudan proclaimed that Libya had rearmed the JEM – what the JEM denied – and then closed its border with Libya, rather a symbolic measure considering of the fact that it was impossible to monitor the border region.¹⁶

JEM (Justice and Equality Movement)

Let us look closer at the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). The JEM was founded in 2003 by a group of educated and politically experienced people from Darfur led by Dr. Khalil Ibrahim, who was a former member of the Sudanese government. The majority of the JEM members originates from the Zaghawa and is closely interlinked with the Chadian government.¹⁷ JEM's main supporter after its expulsion from Chad was the Gaddafi regime, which, according to rumors, has provided anywhere between 10 and 100 million US Dollars during the Libyan uprisings in return for military support against the Libyan rebels.

After Gaddafi's fall, the JEM had to look for other resources, which it hopes to receive from South Sudan and Uganda. Uganda maintains good relations with the SPLM and Libya, while relations with Khartoum are extremely tense, because Sudan is accused of supporting the Ugandan rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army.¹⁸

There are also speculations that Eritrea – an earlier supporter of the JEM – could re-establish its links to the rebel group in expectation of a possible renewed conflict between North and South Sudan, for example by reviving activities in the JEM camps in Eritrea.¹⁹ Eritrea's support also results from the improving relationship between Sudan and Ethiopia, which is Eritrea's arch-enemy. Smaller JEM divisions have already been located in South Sudan and in Uganda. JEM also maintains a smaller force in Darfur.²⁰

In July 2011, South Sudan had gained independence and agreed with North Sudan on a nine-month transitional period in order to settle unresolved disputes. These nine months have expired, but open questions have not yet been settled. Tensions along the border remain high resulting in clashes in March, April and Mai 2012, when the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) bombed positions inside South Sudan.²¹ The spreading of the conflict goes along with rising international concerns that the fighting could lead to a third

¹⁶ Small Arms Survey 2011a 1-2.

¹⁷ Small Arms Survey 2011b: 1.

¹⁸ Schomerus 2007.

¹⁹ Prunier 2008: 6; Small Arms Survey 2011a: 2.

²⁰ Small Arms Survey 2011b: 2.

²¹ De Juan 2012: 2; Small Arms Survey 2013: 5-6.

Sudanese civil war. Fighting first erupted in the region of Abyei in May 2011, just few months before South Sudan's independence²², which had sets Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) against the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and its affiliated militias.²³

The tensions between the government of Sudan and the northern faction of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM-N) in the provinces of South Kordofan and Blue Nile, was followed by the alliance of the Darfur rebels after the leader of the JEM, Khalil Ibrahim, had returned from Libya with large number of war equipment in September 2011.²⁴ As a result, the Darfur insurgent groups – including the JEM and two factions of the SLA²⁵ merged into the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) to assist the government's other opponent, the SPLM-N. They together demand a regime change to solve the national problem of marginalization, of which Darfur was only a part.²⁶

Following the new alliance under the umbrella of the SRF, Khalil Ibrahim wanted to move the JEM's forces to South Kordofan. On 25 December 2011 he was killed in South Kordofan by a government airstrike while he was leading the JEM forces from the Chad-Sudan border to South-Sudan. A month after his death, on 26 January 2012, Khalil's brother, Gibril Ibrahim, was elected as chairman of the movement.

Conclusion

So, what is the current situation? The rebel leader Dr. Khalil Ibrahim got killed in an airstrike in December 2011 and shortly after his brother Gibril Ibrahim was elected to replace him. Large parts of the JEM are probably fighting with Libyan war equipment alongside the SPLM-N against the Sudanese Armed Forces in South Kordofan. They are probably backed by South Sudan, Uganda and maybe Eritrea after having lost their strongest backer Libya and Chad²⁷. The ongoing disputes between North and South Sudan are likely to lead to a third Sudanese civil war.

In Chad, President Idriss Déby lost much of his kin related support among the Zaghawa, especially after he turned his back on the JEM and cooperated with al-Bashir in Sudan. It seems that Déby now tries to strengthen his relations to the Arabic groups in his country and in Sudan. In January 2012, he married the daughter of the Janjaweed²⁸ mi-

²² Small Arms Survey 2012.

²³ De Juan 2012 : 2.

²⁴ Sudan Vision Daily 2011; Sudan Tribune 2011a; Flint 2011; Authors personal conversation with JEM members in November 2012.

²⁵ For the Sudan Liberation Army it is Abdul Wahid (SLA-AW) and for the Sudan Liberation Army it is Minni Minawi (SLA-MM).

²⁶ Small Arms Survey 2011b: 2.

²⁷ Gramizzi et al. 2012: 9-10.

²⁸ The word "Janjaweed" is formed from the Arabic words for "man", "gun" and "horse" and is used to define gunmen that operate in Darfur, western Sudan, and eastern Chad.

litia leader Musa Hilal²⁹ in Khartoum and, according to press reports, paid 26 million USD, (of which Musa Hilal received 25 million and his daughter one million in form of gold and jewelry.³⁰) Déby's wedding ceremony with the Janjaweed leader's daughter was also attended by Musa Hilal himself and by al-Bashir. Only Déby himself was absent. Bashir is accused of war crimes in Darfur by the International Criminal Court in Den Haag, but Déby refused to arrest al-Bashir on the grounds of the ICC charges when he visited Chad. This hints the direction of Chad's future political orientation after Déby has also lost his closest backer Libya.³¹

Chad is the country where the regional geopolitical dimensions of the Libyan crisis are most visible, due to Gaddafi's constant interference in its internal politics in the past and its central geographical location at the crossroads between the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, and between the western and eastern Sahel.³² The Libyan crisis again demonstrated Idriss Déby's ability to steer through the regional storms, even though it meant he had to move back from his initial position.³³ His newly adopted position seems to have moved him closer to Sudan, al-Bashir and to the ethnic groups around Musa Hilal, mainly Arabic groups.

But other open questions will remain. Among them, for example the status of Chadian and other foreign workers in Libya, as well as the status of those who had fled the country back to Chad or to other countries of the Sahel during the Libyan insurgencies. Further, the future relationship between a new regime in Libya and Chad will have a large influence on the security situation of the whole region.

The proliferation of Libyan arms as in the case of the JEM can be noted in Mali and may affect the entire Sub-Saharan area. Some decades ago, Gaddafi had started to integrate large numbers of Tuareg fighters into his army who have returned well equipped to their home countries after Gaddafi's fall, mostly to Mali and Niger. After the military coup in Mali that overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré, the military junta is confronted with a new Tuareg rebellion that has plunged Mali's north into an armed conflict, partly fuelled by Gaddafi's weapons. The coup is a disaster for Mali and for West Africa as a whole, because it might spread over the wider region. The unknown number of weapons that circulates after Gaddafi's fall in Libya's southern countries has certainly already impinged on the region's stability from Mali to Sudan.³⁴ These developments have given rise to worries concerning an increase of smuggle – of drugs, weapons and people –, terrorism threats as well as the overall deterioration of the situation in the Sahel, especially in Mali, Niger, Chad, North and South Sudan, which again are on the brink of war.³⁵

²⁹ Musa Hilal was as militia leader responsible for atrocities against civilians in Darfur in 2003 and was announced as chief advisor of the Ministry of Federal Affairs in Sudan in 2008.

³⁰ Sudan Tribune 2012.

³¹ Sudan Tribune 2011b.

³² International Crisis Group 2011: 14.

³³ International 2011: 5.

³⁴ International Crisis Group 2012.

³⁵ International Crisis Group 2011: 14.

To conclude, the example of the ambiguous and variable relations between Chad, Sudan and Libya shows how interlinked and complex the contest of political orders may be and how fast political partnerships, alliances and assistances may change.

The rebel movement JEM, which is strongly connected with the Zaghawa, closely interlinked with political leaders of Chad, Sudan and Libya and which has supporters in Uganda, South Sudan, Eritrea and western countries, exemplifies how a rebel movement may use a power vacuum in a border zone for its own goals and how fast they can change their area of operation: in this example the JEM first operated in Darfur, then turned to N'Djaména and areas inside Chad, fought for Gaddafi in Libya and can now be found alongside the SPLM-N in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan and South Sudan. This shows that rebel movements are not restricted to a local area, but are widely interlinked with other regions and actors in contest of orders in the larger region.

Especially in Chad and Sudan the situation was already tense and hostile before the uprisings of the "Arab Spring" in the Mediterranean region. But with the spread of uncertain quantities of weapons southwards in the wake of the uprisings in Libya and after Gaddafi's death, the situation here and elsewhere has become worse as we can already witness in Mali and in Sudan. In the face of these recent developments one has to hope that the different countries and especially the international community will be able to prevent a slide into an even worse scenario, resulting that the so called "Arab Spring" could lead into a dark and cloudy "African Winter", which could bring large storms over the wider sub-Saharan region.

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