

Union des Forces de Résistance (UFR)/Union of the Forces of Resistance

Origins/Composition

Founded on 18 January 2009, the UFR is the latest Khartoum-backed coalition of Chadian armed opposition groups. It is led by Timan Erdimi, a Bideyat and close cousin of Idriss Déby. Its aim was to replace the Alliance Nationale (AN/National Alliance) led by Mahamat Nouri, who had failed to resolve divisions within the AN, in particular between himself and Timan. These divisions were among the main causes of the failure of the joint raid by Nouri and Timan's forces on N'Djaména in February 2008, but it took Khartoum, which had decided to give a second chance to Mahamat Nouri as the main coalition leader, almost a year to finally implement the major change in strategy that the creation of UFR represents. The Sudanese government had previously been more reluctant to support Beri armed opposition groups than other groups, and above all to put Timan Erdimi at the head of a coalition. This was due to the assumption that if he ever reaches power, he may be no more able than Déby to prevent his kin from supporting Darfuri opposition groups. The new strategy seems to rely on the hope that Timan might help convince the Beri community in N'Djaména, which had mobilized to defend the government against Nouri, to change sides. Timan and his twin brother Tom, the latter in exile in the US, have both occupied major positions in the Déby government, in particular as successive chiefs of staff of the president.

The UFR comprises eight main Chadian armed opposition groups:

1. Rassemblement des forces pour le changement/Rally of the Forces for Change (RFC)

Timan Erdimi's group, founded in December 2005, is itself a coalition of several Bideyat deserter groups. The principal one was the Socle pour le changement, l'unité et la démocratie/Platform for Change, Unity, and Democracy (SCUD), established in October 2005. Its leader, Yaya Dillo Djérou, a nephew of the Erdimi brothers, joined the government in November 2007 with some of his troops. Initially known as the Rassemblement des forces démocratiques/Rally of the Democratic Forces (RAFD), the group took the name RFC in February 2007 during a brief alliance with the Ouaddaïan Rassemblement national démocratique populaire/Popular Democratic National Rally (RNDP). The RFC consists of approximately 800 men.

2. Union des forces pour la démocratie et le développement/Union of Forces for Democracy and Development (UFDD)

Originally, the UFDD was a major Sudanese-supported coalition, founded on 22 October 2006 and led by Mahamat Nouri, a Goran from the Anakazza sub-group. Since the founding of the UFR, Mahamat Nouri had made it clear that he was unhappy to be pushed into a subordinate role or replaced by Timan Erdimi. The divide was evident during and immediately after the battle of Am Dam, where the UFR was defeated by the Chadian army in May 2009. Only one year later, in May

2010, Nouri officially withdrew from the UFR to form his own coalition, the Alliance nationale pour le changement démocratique/National Alliance for Democratic Change (ANCD).

Some members of the UFDD did not follow him, while others did and then returned to the UFR after just a few days. The main former UFDD leaders who are still part of the UFR are Abakar Tollimi, the General Secretary of the UFR, Tahir Wodji, its chief of staff (and ex-UFDD chief of staff), and Tahir Guinassou, its defence secretary (and President Idriss Déby's ex-security adviser). They recruit mostly from the Bideyat Borogat (Tollimi's tribe) as well as the Goran of the Gaeda sub-group (Guinassou's tribe), two of the tribes living in the southwest of the Ennedi Mountains in north-eastern Chad. Their split with Nouri can be seen as one between their 'Ennedi group' and the 'Borkou group' of Nouri, the latter comprising mostly Goran of the Anakazza sub-group, from the Borkou region around Faya in central northern Chad. (However the Donza, a minority Goran sub-group from Borkou, left Nouri; Tahir Wodji also recruits among his own Kreda tribe, a large Goran sub-group of Bahr-el-Ghazal north of Lake Chad). Relations between the Bideyat Borogat of Tollimi and the Bideyat Bilia of Timan Erdimi are no less difficult. Tollimi has been asking for Timan's removal as leader of the UFR, threatening to leave the coalition if he is not ousted. The 'Ennedi group' has an estimated 40 vehicles and some 500 combatants at its disposal. In July 2010, after Khartoum asked the Chadian armed opposition leaders to leave its territory, Tollimi moved to Mali. Some in his group are hoping to return to Chad and settle in the Ennedi Mountains, where they already have connections with a small group of Borogat defectors from the Chadian army.

3. Union des forces pour le changement et la démocratie/Union of Forces for Change and Democracy (UFCD)

This faction was founded in March 2008 by Adouma Hassaballah Djadareb (half-Arab, half-Ouaddaïan), ex-vice president of the UFDD, in an attempt to become autonomous from Mahamat Nouri. Adouma had been a member of the Front populaire pour la renaissance nationale/ Popular Front for National Rebirth (FPRN), then of the first Khartoum-backed coalition, the Front uni pour le changement/United Front for Change (FUC) in 2005–06. He took numerous Ouaddaïan combatants with him to join the UFDD in the wake of the failed FUC attack on N'Djaména in 2006. Today his faction numbers around 1,500 mostly Ouaddaïan combatants, making it the main component of the UFR (and the entire Chadian opposition). Adouma Hasaballah is the first vice-president of the group.

4. UFDD-Fondamentale

This group is an Arab breakaway faction from the UFDD, founded in May 2007 by Abdelwahid Aboud Makaye, now the UFR's second vice-president.

5. Conseil démocratique révolutionnaire/Revolutionary Democratic Council (CDR)

One of the oldest Chadian opposition groups and members of the historic movement of Chadian Arabs, the CDR was founded in 1978 and led by Awlad Rashid Arab Acyl

Ahmat Aghbach until his death in 1982, and then by Acheikh Ibn Oumar Saïd (also an Awlad Rashid Arab). Acheikh Ibn Oumar retained the name of the historic movement of Chadian Arabs when he left France, where he was a political refugee, to rejoin the rebellion in Sudan in 2006–07. Soon afterwards he founded the UFDD with Mahamat Nouri. In May 2007, as the head of a reduced CDR, he split with Nouri and returned to France. When UFR was founded, he left the leadership and the name of the CDR to Albadour Acyl Ahmat Aghbach, son of the late first leader of the movement, and became UFR's spokesperson in France.

6. Front pour la salut de la république/ Front for the Salvation of the Republic (FSR)

Founded in 2007 and led by Ahmat Hassaballah Soubiane, a Chadian Arab from the Rizeigat Mahamid branch and a former minister under Déby as well as Chad's ambassador to the US, this group was initially not strongly supported by the Sudanese government. But on 3 February 2008, the FSR joined UFDD troops to attack Adré and agreed to join Mahamat Nouri's new coalition, Alliance nationale. Soubiane's participation in the UFR did not last long. Just a week after the foundation of the coalition, he challenged Timan Erdimi's leadership and withdrew from the movement, although he was not followed by all of his troops. This move allowed him to open direct negotiations with N'Djaména in Libya and to join the government in July 2009.

Chadians were surprised that Soubiane, such a prominent politician, was not immediately rewarded for his support with a government position, not even as part of the new government formed in March 2010. Eventually he was granted the (weak) position of presidential adviser. Similar to the UFDD-Fondamentale and the CDR, the FSR recruited among Arab communities straddling the Chad–Sudan border. More than the two other movements, the FSR was known to recruit among Khartoum-backed Arab militias in Darfur known as the 'janjaweed', among whom the Mahamid (Soubiane's tribe, many originating from Chad) are well represented.

7. Front populaire pour la renaissance nationale/ Popular Front for National Rebirth (FPRN)

Consisting mostly of Ouaddaïan combatants, this group also broke away from the UFR after a few months. Until then, its leader, Adoum Yacoub 'Koukou' was commissioner of the armed forces in the UFR.

8. Union démocratique pour le changement/ Democratic Union for change (UDC)

This is primarily a political group, led by Abderahman Koulamallah, the son of Ahmed Koulamallah, a Chadian politician since the colonial period and the heir of one of the great families of the Chadian elite, linked to the Baguirmi sultanate around N'Djaména.

Areas of activity/capacity

Originally the UFR, and before it was formed most of the former Chadian armed opposition coalitions and movements that became part of it, were based in West

Darfur, in particular in the Habila area south of the state capital, El Geneina. The RFC had also been based north of El Geneina, in the mountains of Hadjer Morfaïn, at the border south of Guéréda town.

After the UFR defeat in Am Dam in May 2009, the Sudanese government asked the Chadian armed opposition groups that had returned to Sudan to move to North Darfur. They first settled around the Ain Siro/Furnung Mountains in August 2009, and later in Abdeshakur area, along the government-controlled road between Kutum and Am Boru. The move appeared to indicate a clear change of strategy by Khartoum as a sign of goodwill towards N'Djaména. On the other hand, Khartoum may also have been hoping to use the UFR against Darfuri opposition groups, including both Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) dissidents who control the Ain Siro Mountains and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), which has been active in north-western Darfur. In the event, the UFR made clear that it would not fight against Darfuri armed groups. Its strategy is to avoid proxy fighting that might make it look like a mercenary force. Its Beri leaders and troops are also unwilling to fight their Sudanese kin in the JEM.

Today, the fighters within the UFR are thought to number an estimated 4,000, with 300 vehicles at their disposal. This is fewer than half of the vehicles the UFR had in May 2009, before its members had started to defect and after having been rearmed by the Sudanese government. Some were lost during Am Dam and other battles in May, while others dispersed into Chad, and some 40 were confiscated by Khartoum.

Sources of financing/support

The UFR has been strongly financed and supported (with arms, ammunitions, cars, fuel, and food) by the Sudanese government, in particular before its failed raid on Eastern Chad in May 2009. Support clearly seems to have decreased since then, and in particular since the rapprochement between Khartoum and N'Djaména in early 2010. However there are also rumours of continuous or renewed support, in particular in May–June 2010, but not at previous levels. It is not clear whether this means Khartoum might be giving a last chance to the Chadian opposition to overthrow Déby. There are also parallel rumours that N'Djaména rearmed and refinanced JEM before expelling it back to Sudan in March 2010, thereby reneging on its agreement with Khartoum. Alternatively the Sudan government may simply have given the UFR enough support to return to Chad, in the hope of getting rid of it.

Status

In October 2007, N'Djaména signed an agreement in Sirte, Libya, with four armed opposition groups, three of which are among the main factions of the UFR: the UFDD (which then included Adouma Hassaballah's faction); the UFDD-Fondamentale; and the RFC. Only the fourth one, the Concorde nationale du Tchad/Chad National Concord (CNT) implemented the agreement, and after separate negotiations, joined the Chadian government. Since then, Chad (and a large part of the international community) has considered the Sirte agreement to be valid and in need of

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implementation by the groups that signed it. Meanwhile, these groups have been asking for more inclusive negotiations, including with non-armed opposition groups and civil society. Déby has refused to open up the talks. Since his rapprochement with

Khartoum he has also refused the idea of holding negotiations parallel to those between the Sudanese government and the Darfuri armed opposition groups. This idea seems to be favoured by Khartoum, which does not seem ready to expel UFR as Déby has done with the JEM. In July 2010, Khartoum ordered the main Chadian rebel leaders (including UFR's president Timan Erdimi and its vice-president Adouma Hassaballah, as well as Mahamat Nouri) to leave its territory, but in a much softer manner, and their troops are still inside Sudan.

The only recent Chadian 'peace' initiative has been to send the new 'national mediator' Abderahman Moussa to Khartoum to negotiate with the armed groups. It is likely that N'Djaména will keep trying to divide the factions to negotiate with each separately, knowing that it will be easier to gain support from some than others. In particular it will be difficult for the Erdimi brothers, given the depth of their family struggle against Déby, to support the government again.

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