

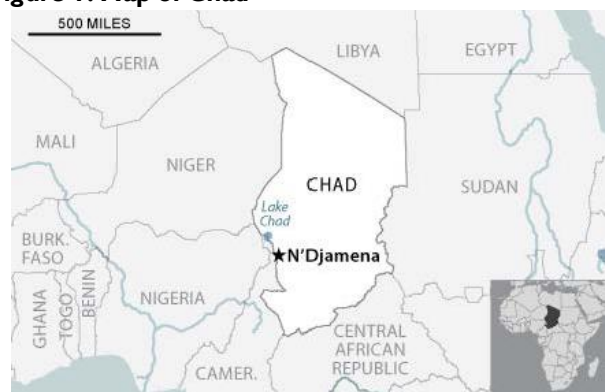
April 26, 2021

## Chad: Implications of President Déby's Death and Transition

Chad's President Idriss Déby, a former army chief who seized power in a rebellion in 1990, was pronounced dead on April 20, 2021, reportedly from battlefield injuries, one week after an election that would have given him a sixth term in office. He reportedly was wounded in a visit to the frontline where his troops were defending against a Chadian rebel advance launched from neighboring Libya. An army spokesman gave notice of Déby's death on state television, announcing the dissolution of the government and the National Assembly and the formation of a military council led by Déby's son, General Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno, aka Mahamat Kaka. The military council has proposed, in contravention of the constitution, to lead Chad for an 18-month transitional period before elections are held.

Déby, one of the world's longest ruling heads of state, was an influential leader on the continent (his former foreign minister serves as the African Union's top diplomat), in part due to the prowess of Chad's military. The United States, France, and neighboring Nigeria, among others, viewed him as a key counterterrorism partner. Chad's regional military interventions under Déby raised his international status, and by some accounts helped to deflect Western donor concerns over repression, human rights abuses, and corruption.

Figure 1. Map of Chad



Source: CRS graphic.

### Regional Security Dynamics

Chad, a landlocked country twice the size of Texas with a turbulent history since its independence from France in 1960, sits in the center of an unstable region. Déby assertively leveraged Chad's oil resources and foreign patronage to become an influential regional figure, and his death is expected to have broad regional implications.

**Libya.** The disputed border region between Chad and Libya is an important regional transit corridor. Ethnic groups spanning the border are influential in both countries, and Chadian armed groups have participated on all sides of various conflicts in Libya since 2011. In April 2021, forces of the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT, more

below) launched an incursion from southeastern Libya into northern Chad. FACT had claimed neutrality in Libya's conflict, but reportedly recently provided support to the Libyan National Army/Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LNA) movement led by Khalifa Haftar. FACT previously had aligned itself with Haftar's western Libya-based opponents. Libya's transition remains contested. The United States supports U.N.-led efforts to extend a tenuous national ceasefire, ensure foreign forces' departure, and prepare for elections in December 2021. U.S. Embassy Libya asserted that FACT's offensive "again highlights the urgent need for a unified, stable Libya with control over its borders."

**Sudan.** Chad's politics are linked to those of Sudan, which is in the midst of a fragile transition following the 2019 ouster of long-ruling president Omar al-Bashir by his military. In Sudan, citizens used social media to coordinate the protests that prompted Bashir's overthrow. In Chad, meanwhile, Déby's government had restricted internet access for extensive periods, particularly during periods of heightened political dispute.

Like their Chadian counterparts, rebels from Sudan's Darfur region have used Libya as a rear base and fought in the conflict there. Some have begun to return to Sudan as part of an October 2020 Sudanese peace agreement that Déby helped to facilitate. Déby, who once launched his own rebellion from Sudan, engaged in a proxy war with Bashir in the mid-2000s before mending ties with him in 2010. The proxy war culminated in Chadian rebel assaults on N'Djamena in 2006 and 2008 and a Sudanese rebel attack on Khartoum in 2008. The leaders' agreement to cease support for each other's armed oppositions quieted the region and led to cooperation on border security.

Chad's relations with Sudan's transitional government have been cordial. There has been speculation, though, that former Janjaweed militia leader Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, aka "Hemeti," might seek to influence a political transition in Chad. Hemeti, who now holds a top government post in Sudan, hails from a Chadian Arab clan and maintains strong ties with Chadian Arab politicians. Déby's Zaghawa ethnic group (a small minority in Chad) spans the border, and Zaghawa played a prominent role in the Darfur rebellion. Violence in Darfur is rising, displacing over 250,000 people since the beginning of 2021, as peacekeepers have exited. Some observers warn that intercommunal conflicts could pull Darfur back to war. Instability in Chad could worsen the situation, with ramifications for Sudan's transition.

**Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel.** Chadian forces have played an integral role in U.S.- and AU-backed efforts to combat Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (IS-WA) in the Lake Chad Basin region (comprising adjacent areas of Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Nigeria). Déby recently accused his neighbors of bearing an

insufficient burden in that campaign and threatened to limit Chadian troop deployments beyond Chad's borders. His government later reaffirmed its participation in the regional Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), to which the United States provides logistics and advisory support.

A diversion of Chadian forces from the Lake Chad Basin could further challenge a regional counterinsurgency effort beset by capacity gaps, limited cross-border coordination, and competing security priorities. Nigeria's government has described Déby as Nigeria's strongest ally in the MNJTF, stressed the critical role he played in making Chad a "buffer between North Africa, the Sahel, East and West Africa" and expressed concern after his death that "his demise could lead to vacuums that could implode" in Chad's periphery.

Observers have warned that Déby's death may also affect counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel. In early 2021, at the request of other Sahel countries and France, Chad pledged to deploy 1,200 soldiers to the tri-border region linking Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, where local groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State are active. The deployment is part of a regional effort by the G5 Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger). Chad has played a leading role in French-led counterterrorism operations in the Sahel for nearly a decade; its troops first deployed to Mali in 2013 alongside French forces to oust Al Qaeda-linked groups, and in 2014, France established an enduring counterterrorism mission in the region, Operation Barkhane, headquartered in N'Djamena. Chad is also a top troop contributor to the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali.

## Domestic Issues

Déby was a French-trained military officer who led the army of former president His sène Habré (convicted in 2016 in Senegal of war crimes and crimes against humanity) before rebelling against him. Déby in turn faced several coup attempts and uprisings during his 30 years in power.

Chad's regional military interventions, while attracting foreign donor support, may have overstretched its forces. Déby periodically recalled deployed units to defend against domestic threats, highlighting aspects of the fragility of his regime even as he sought to display strength abroad.

The country ranks among the world's poorest, despite oil exports, and among the most corrupt. Instability and poor governance have hindered development, and economic problems, elite impunity, ethnic favoritism, and repression have fueled discontent. Déby and his party have dominated elections against a weak and fractured opposition.

Chad has never had a democratic transfer of power. Experts had long warned of a potential crisis if Déby died. He had no vice president. A new constitution adopted in 2018 abolished the prime minister post, expanded presidential powers, and gave him the option to run for two more terms.

The military council's assumption of power contradicts the constitution (which it has suspended). In the event of a presidential vacancy, it requires elections within 90 days and stipulates that the National Assembly president assume interim presidential powers. Haroun Kabadi has led the Assembly since the last legislative polls, in 2011, which international observers deemed credible. Kabadi

purportedly declined to assume power after Déby's death and has since expressed his support for the military council.

Civil society and opposition parties have condemned the seizure of power by Déby's son and the military council as a coup. Divisions in the military have emerged, with some pressing for the council to cede power. The opposition has rejected the council's April 26 appointment of former prime minister Albert Padacké to reassume the post. Padacké ran against Déby in the April 11 election (boycotted by most of the opposition), but was seen by many as a Déby ally.

FACT asserts that it took up arms "because there was no democratic space in Chad" and says it seeks a democratic transition, not to hold power. Comprised primarily of Goran (Habré's ethnic group), it has reportedly been building a more diverse coalition that includes ethnic Zaghawa. FACT told the Presidents of Niger and Mauritania, who have sought to act as mediators, that it is ready to discuss a ceasefire and participate in a national dialogue. The military council has rejected the prospect of talks with FACT.

The AU, which has sought to discourage unconstitutional changes of government, has expressed grave concern with the military council's establishment and urged a restoration of constitutional order and a transfer of power to civilians. Experts warn that international responses to events in Chad may send signals to military leaders elsewhere, amidst a broader trend of democratic backsliding on the continent.

## French Engagement

France, a key ally of Déby's, reportedly provided logistics and intelligence support to Chadian forces responding to the FACT advance. It did not intervene militarily, as it had in early 2019 when another rebel group launched an incursion. The 2019 strikes prompted French lawmakers to accuse the government of "propping up African strongmen." France has defended the military council, describing it as necessary to ensure stability. President Macron declared at Déby's funeral, "France will not let anybody put into question or threaten today or tomorrow Chad's stability and integrity."

## U.S. Policy Considerations

The United States has provided substantial military aid to Chad by regional standards, to build its counterterrorism and peacekeeping capacity. The military council's actions could have implications for that aid, should the executive branch determine that the military seized power from a "duly elected" leader (CRS In Focus IF11267, *Coup-Related Restrictions in U.S. Foreign Aid Appropriations*).

The State Department expressed U.S. support for "a peaceful transition of power in accordance with the Chadian constitution" after Déby's death, and has since pressed for a "transition to a civilian-led government." Policymakers, including in Congress, may weigh options to foster greater political stability in Chad, including with regard to security assistance, economic policy tools (including sanctions), and direct engagement with Chadian and regional leaders.

---

**Lauren Ploch Blanchard, Coordinator**, Specialist in African Affairs

**Alexis Arieff**, Specialist in African Affairs

**Christopher M. Blanchard**, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

---

**Tomás F. Husted**, Analyst in African Affairs

---

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.