

SITUATION UPDATE

March 2024



Nuba Hopes and Fears: Fuelling SPLA-North Mobilization in South Kordofan

Jonas Horner

KEY FINDINGS

- Underpinning attacks by the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N) of Abdel Aziz al Hilu on Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and attempts to claim territory is a drive to secure self-sufficiency in the face of concerns about security and the viability of the state.
- A larger appeal by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to Arab tribes has driven many South Kordofan fighters from Arab-identifying tribes, historically part of the Islamist Popular Defence Forces (PDF), to fight for the better-resourced RSF.
- While the SPLA-N has sought to take advantage of SAF's preoccupation with the RSF and has captured several outlying garrisons, it has been unable to take control of large towns such as Dilling and Kadugli.
- Fighting in South Kordofan and the blockading of key arterial roads leading in and out of the state has dramatically exacerbated an existing food and medicine crisis, particularly in the western sector of the state, while increasing scarcity of all basic commodities.
- The manifestation of the national conflict at both the state and local level in South Kordofan, combined with pressure on communities to take sides in the war, is tearing at the fragile social fabric that will not be easily repaired.

Overview

President Omar al-Bashir and the National Congress Party (NCP) were ousted in April 2019 after 30 years in power, triggering a flood of optimism in much of South Kordofan state as prospects for a sustainable end to conflict appeared to solidify. The 9 January 2020 visit of Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok of the country's transitional government to Kauda—the Nuba Mountains stronghold of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) of Abdel Aziz al Hilu—brought high hopes for Sudan to turn a page away from the exclusionary governments of a narrow group of Nile Valley tribes that had presided over the political and economic marginalization of populations in the country's peripheries.¹ That marginalization drove a series of serious domestic conflicts that had sporadically engulfed South Kordofan since 1987, when the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) began operations in the state during the Second Sudanese Civil War. Arab tribes living in the state's fertile forested and agricultural plains, who had felt neglected by the Bashir government in the last decade of his rule, expressed similar hopes of a new and more cooperative era with Kordofani neighbours and with the central government.

A 25 October 2021 coup brought Sudan's nascent, stumbling transition to a juddering halt, with more adverse political and economic implications on the peripheries. Khartoum's political turmoil saw old fissures and divisions between ethnic groups resurface almost immediately in South Kordofan as goodwill and optimism over the prospect of a new political and economic landscape dissipated and different identity groups prepared for a return to the more adversarial economic and resource extractive-based military-led political order. These renewed divisions precipitated a new round of low-level conflicts—most notably the violent displacement of the entire Nuba population of Lagawa town in October 2022—pitting the Nuba against Arab-

identifying Misseriya in a resurgence of conflicts over land and water that have occurred historically along mainly ethnic lines (Monitor, 2022). Simultaneously exacerbating this competition, the RSF began to invoke Arab identity politics. They also used their superior spending power, acquired through mercenary activities carried out in Yemen on behalf of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, and their vast regional business interests to recruit Arab Hawazma and Misseriya Humr youth, many of whom were formerly part of the Islamist paramilitary PDF—taking advantage of the significant downturn in the economy to attract new recruits.² The RSF's aggressive countrywide recruitment drive sharpened SAF suspicion of the paramilitary force and heightened the prospect of intra-military conflict. As a result of its chilling effect on the flow of international financial assistance into Sudan, the coup also worsened the country's economic trajectory, inflicting further pressure on communities in South Kordofan and increasing competition for resources, thus pushing more youths into the arms of the RSF.

Triggered by an impasse over the integration of the RSF into SAF, existential quarrels between SAF and the RSF over control of the country spilled over into open, vicious conflict between the two armies in mid-April 2023. While its epicentre remains in the capital as of mid-December 2023, the conflict quickly expanded beyond Khartoum to Darfur as well as to greater Kordofan (ACLED, 2023). In Darfur, the conflict has taken on an overtly ethnic and tribal character, with ethnic cleansing reported and thousands killed in West and Central Darfur alone (Michael and McNeill, 2023). Black Masalit tribespeople were targeted by Arab armed groups—either directly or tangentially affiliated with the RSF (Gouja, 2023). News of the scale and targeting of attacks against the Masalit affected the Nuba in South Kordofan and beyond who had experienced similar ethnic-based attacks and displacement since the late 1980s at the hands of the NCP and allied Arab militias armed by the governments of Sadiq el-Mahdi

1 This paper will use the acronym SPLM-N or SPLA-N to refer to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement- or Army-North faction of Abdel Aziz al Hilu. Al Hilu split from the rival SPLM-N wing of Malik Agar in 2017.

2 Author telephone interview with a Sudan analyst connected to the RSF, 6 September 2023, and a South Kordofan-based academic, 28 March 2023.

and Bashir.³ Disconcerted by events in Sudan, and particularly in West Darfur, and by the RSF's recruitment of Hawazma and Misseriya Humr youth from South Kordofan, the SPLA-N mobilized and took key territory from SAF, due to concerns over a broader state breakdown and an interest in building up a safe and fortified position. 'The [Nuba] saw the horrors of Geneina', said one longer-term observer of the Nuba Mountains, 'and were reminded of the massacres in Kadugli' in 2011.⁴ By expanding its area of control, the SPLA-N feels it can better protect the Nuba, who are at the core of its support base.

The impact of conflict

As in much of Sudan, South Kordofan's security, economy, and intercommunal relations deteriorated following the start of conflict, generating an unsettlingly familiar set of responses from most stakeholders, who had experienced decades of marginalization, war, and hardship. Banditry and looting of livestock and vehicles soared, despite the east remaining relatively secure.

Mercifully for South Kordofan, clashes between SAF and the RSF have been limited since both have concentrated their attention on contesting Darfur, Khartoum, and Obeid (ACLED, 2023; Rondos, 2023). Almost immediately after the conflict began, the RSF pulled nearly all its forces out of South Kordofan, and the remaining SAF forces quickly took control of the RSF camp in Kadugli.⁵ SAF then moved most of its artillery and tanks northward to Khartoum and Obeid to support its efforts in the epicentres of the conflict.⁶

Dubeibat (capital of Al Qoz locality and some 60 km north-east of Dilling) and Taiba (a strategic intersection with roads to El Fula in West Kordofan, El Obeid in North Kordofan, Dilling, and Kadugli) bore the brunt of RSF and affiliated militia raids in June.⁷

In a statement made in June 2023, the SPLM-N urged a halt to the conflict and a return to a political solution through negotiation.⁸ It also declared that certain parties sought to bring the movement into the conflict by involving the SPLA-N in ethnic conflict.⁹ While avoiding openly taking sides, the majority of Nuba came to nominally prefer a SAF victory, seeing the army as a more diverse force and more liable to defend Nuba communities given SAF's significant Nuba contingent, although memories remained of the military's atrocities in the state.¹⁰ In another June statement, however, the SPLM-N described the army in South Kordofan as an 'occupying force' that sought to liberate the entire region from 'the filth of occupation', while referring to attacks on Dilling and Kadugli as 'self-defence'.¹¹

SPLM-N Al Hilu mobilization and attacks on SAF garrisons

After six weeks of conflict between SAF and the RSF, the SPLM-N began attacking and capturing undermanned and abandoned SAF garrisons in the state's eastern localities of Rashad and Abu Kershola in late May 2023 (*Sudan Akhbar*, 2023). By early June, the SPLA-N had moved close to the state capital, Kadugli, attacking SAF compounds and, from late August until end September, placing the state capital under siege.¹² Conflict lines between

3 Abdel Aziz al Hilu's father was Masalit.

4 Author telephone interview with a confidential international source, 26 June 2023.

5 Author telephone interview with a South Kordofan-based academic, 22 June 2023.

6 Confidential international NGO report seen by the author, 9 June 2023.

7 The area is populated primarily by Arab Hawazma and Kenana tribes, as well as Nuba. Confidential UN report seen by the author, 20 June 2023.

8 Statement by Ahmed Yusuf al-Mustafa to Asharq Al-Awsat news outlet (Younis, 2023).

9 Author telephone interview with an NGO worker, 13 September 2023.

10 During Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) negotiations in Juba, Al Hilu made it clear that he would not engage with the RSF as he considered them a militia rather than a component of the national army. Author interview with Abdel Aziz al Hilu, Juba, February 2020.

11 SPLA-N statement by Gen. Kuku Idris, July 2023. This statement was relayed to the author of this paper by a third-party civil society figure.

12 Author telephone interview with a civil society figure, 13 September 2023.

SAF and the SPLA-N also meant that key arteries, particularly the main road between Dilling and Kadugli, were cut, leading to a rapidly worsening food insecurity situation in the state's western sector.¹³

With both SAF and the RSF having largely vacated South Kordofan to place troops in Obeid and Khartoum, the only sizeable SAF contingent left in the state is in Kadugli, under the command of Jau Kafi—an Angolo Nuba.¹⁴ The remainder of SAF in South Kordofan found themselves in poorly defended garrisons with little food, limited artillery, and poor morale.¹⁵ Under these conditions, despite repelling attempts to take larger towns such as Dilling and Kadugli, SAF has lacked the strength to push back substantively against SPLA-N assaults. After fierce battles in June, the SPLA-N seized the Al-Atmur area east of Kadugli and the Joint Forces camp, where three sections of the armed forces were based. The forces of Nuba commander Jau's 14th Division, mobilized originally by the Bashir government to fight the SPLA, and paramilitary forces of Kafe Tayara, a Shatt Nuba from Buram, were also based at the camp.¹⁶ Given the developments of the war, particularly since the sweeping losses sustained in Darfur, SAF is clearly in no position to reinforce its position in South Kordofan due to the extreme pressure it is being placed under by the RSF in Khartoum and Obeid.

SPLM-N rationale

SAF's vastly weakened and distracted position in the state has provided the SPLA-N with the opportunity to undertake a low-risk set of military operations with several intertwined strategic purposes: to protect the Nuba from attacks by Arab militias affiliated

with the RSF; to reclaim territory taken by SAF and associated Hawazma and Misseriya militias, particularly during conflict in the state between 2011 and 2016; to ensure the geographic consolidation of this territory and thus facilitate the defence and cultivation of lowland areas to increase self-sufficiency; and to strengthen the movement's hand in any future peace talks.¹⁷

Despite these rationales, there remains considerable consternation and confusion within the Nuba Mountains Liberation Council and the rank and file of the SPLA-N as to the purpose of these offensives.¹⁸ Even where it has ejected SAF, the SPLA-N does not have the weaponry or armour to hold large swathes of territory beyond its own core areas of existing control. Furthermore, many of the attacks carried out on towns in August and September—particularly in and around the state capital, Kadugli—saw an increase in deaths, injuries, and hardship within the city (and among SPLA-N personnel) due to fighting and its impact on food and medical supplies—even prompting some SPLA-N fighters to refuse to participate in these offensives.¹⁹

In areas where Nuba have traditionally maintained a strategically diverse set of means of food production and livelihoods, the loss of farmland and forested areas during the 2011–16 conflict with the government has been particularly galling for Nuba identities and put new, extreme pressures on Nuba communities' economies, livelihoods, and food security.²⁰ The SPLM-N has chafed at the loss, over decades, of key agricultural land in lowland areas to government-backed Arab militias. An emerging sense of the need to assure self-sufficiency—particularly given the state's new level of isolation—has boosted the importance of recapturing that land to provide food security. Moreover, the capture of this land enables

13 Author telephone interview with a civil society figure, 13 September 2023; see also Save the Children (2023).

14 Researchers in South Kordofan reported the presence in Kadugli of SAF units from the 10th Infantry Division in Abu Jubaiyah and armoured units from Abri, about 50 km west of Abu Jubaiyah on the edge of the Nuba Mountains. Confidential situational update report on the Sudan conflict by S4GS, 3 May 2023.

15 Confidential report seen by the author by an international organization, 7 June 2023.

16 Author telephone interview with South Kordofan-based academic, 22 June 2023.

17 Confidential UN report seen by the author, 21 June 2023.

18 Author telephone interviews with a civil society figure, 13 September 2023; a South Kordofan-based NGO worker, 13 September 2023; and a researcher, 18 September 2023.

19 Around 300–400 SPLA-N fighters were reportedly killed in recent attacks on Kadugli. Author telephone interview with a researcher, 18 September 2023.

20 Author telephone interview with an SPLM-N official, 4 April 2023.

the SPLM-N to militarily link its existing patchwork of enclaves in a cohesive zone of control, dramatically improving its ability to defend its territory.

Despite the RSF's significant presence in areas of West Kordofan since October and November 2023, South Kordofan has not constituted a priority for the RSF to date, both due to ongoing battles with SAF elsewhere and because of previous unsuccessful forays into the state. In October and November 2013, in the RSF's first operations outside of Darfur, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo—known as 'Hemeti'—was pressed to fight the SPLA-N in South Kordofan by Bashir and then governor Ahmed Haroun. The RSF found the South Kordofan terrain challenging to fight in, losing significant numbers of troops before retreating two months later.²¹ Hawazma (and perhaps Misseriya) fighters have, however, already returned from fighting with the RSF in Obeid, constituting a more localized—but no less combustible—concern. Additionally, new weaponry acquired by the RSF from the UAE may tilt the military balance in any future conflict in the Nuba Mountains (Walsh, Koettl, and Schmitt, 2023).²²

Restrictions to movement, and their impact on South Kordofan's economy

South Kordofan's economic fortunes have been in freefall since well before the ousting of President Bashir; however, the October 2021 coup consolidated that downward turn as international assistance was frozen in response to the military takeover.²³ In SPLM-N areas where optimism over economic recovery had risen following Prime Minister Hamdok's visit to

Kauda in January 2020, the coup immediately raised new apprehensions.

The outbreak of conflict hit the state's economy hard in both government- and SPLM-N-controlled areas, since both the production and transport routes of goods arriving in, and exiting, the state were disrupted or cut and government disbursement of already scarce state funds halted.²⁴ The cost of market goods across the state has skyrocketed and hunger has become a palpable problem in both urban and rural areas given basic food scarcity (USAID, 2023). The western side of the state—along the Dilling–Kadugli axis—has fared worse than the eastern sector of Abassiya, Abu Jubaiyah, and Rashad, in part because the arrival of internally displaced persons without food or supplies has boosted competition for both, affecting pricing and scarcity.²⁵ Most problematically, government employees, including police and soldiers, stopped receiving salaries from the outset of the conflict: some 70 per cent of income in the state is derived from government salaries, and the health of marketplaces across South Kordofan is heavily reliant on the payment of these salaries.²⁶ All-important peace markets in Abassiya, Abu Jubaiyah, Kalogi, and Kuloulu have all been affected by severe shortages and high prices.²⁷

Roads into South Kordofan—the lifelines of the state's economy—have been blockaded, with checkpoints set up by the RSF or bandits. The crucial Dilling–Kadugli road had been blocked by fighting between SAF and the SPLA-N, though as of writing SAF controls a southern 60-km section of this road from Kadugli to Taiga Tagatu while the SPLA-N controls the northern section from Dilling down to Dushuol/Dashul. The SPLA-N had control of the Kadugli–Dilling road, with only civilian movements allowed (Radio Dabanga, 2023c).²⁸ The

21 Author telephone interview with a civil society figure, 16 November 2023.

22 Author interview with a Western intelligence source, location withheld, 20 July 2023.

23 Author interviews with a Western ambassador, Khartoum, 30 August 2022, and a Humanitarian Aid Commission official, Khartoum, 20 March 2023.

24 Author telephone interview with a confidential South Kordofan-based civil society source, 18 September 2023.

25 Author telephone interview with a South Kordofan-based academic, 22 June 2023.

26 Author telephone interview with a civil society figure, 21 June 2023.

27 Author telephone interview with a South Kordofan-based academic, 14 May 2023.

28 Author telephone interview with a South Kordofan-based academic, 22 June 2023.

road from Kosti—the key route for international aid and assistance—sees some trade, but has been regularly rendered unsafe by looting and the presence of RSF roadblocks.²⁹ Fighting around Dubeibat blocked another north–south route. As a result, agricultural, livestock, charcoal, and forest products produced in South Kordofan for trade in Khartoum and beyond simply cannot be transported and sold to generate income.

In areas where cross-line trade between government- and SPLM-N-held areas had been a lifeline for populations on both sides, much of that trade has now largely been halted—a further casualty of the SPLA-N’s offensives against SAF positions. Two peace markets in As Sunut locality—in Kasha and Shifir—continue to operate, facilitating cross-line trade. They serve three main towns of Abu Zaba, Dilling and As Sunut.³⁰ The conflict has forced the establishment of new routes and currently goods are moving around South and West Kordofan along four axes: Al Fula–Lagawa–Jangaro–Kadugli; Na’am–Keilak–Kadugli; Adu Zabad–Om Jamina (Kasha) or Shifir–Dilling; and Aweil–Meiram–Babanusa.³¹ In southern sectors of SPLA-N-held territory, including Kadugli, goods mostly arrive from South Sudan. In northern and western sectors held by the SPLA-N, goods are smuggled in from government-held areas.³²

The existential nature of the current conflict and associated criticality of paying troops means that control of gold mines in South Kordofan, a major source of revenue for SAF, the RSF, and the SPLA-N, is ultimately likely to be violently contested. In response to the conflict, many miners working in small-scale artisanal gold mines—especially in Azraq, Kalogi, and Talodi—have simply continued to

mine.³³ Larger companies on the eastern side of the Nuba Mountains, however, have struggled to continue operations given the shortage of fuel and supplies.

Displacement

By late August 2023, the Humanitarian Aid Commission reported that 9 out of 17 South Kordofan localities had been affected by the clashes, resulting in the displacement of almost 70,000 people (*Sudan Tribune*, 2023). The SPLA-N offensive on Kadugli alone accounted for the displacement of 50,000 people by early September under ‘near siege conditions’ (Save the Children, 2023). Almost immediately after the outbreak of conflict, SPLM-N-controlled territory in the Nuba Mountains became a destination for Nuba (and some Arabs) seeking relief from the new economic and security pressures of the conflict in government areas of the state, as well as Nuba fleeing larger cities such as Khartoum and Obeid. At the end of November, the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency reported the displacement of some 320,898 people into areas controlled by the SPLM-N.³⁴ This flow of displaced people into SPLM-N areas has placed significant pressure on already stretched services, with one humanitarian official worrying that the SPLM-N ‘don’t have the capacity to provide any type of support for displaced people’.³⁵ By the end of August, the UN warned that Kadugli’s food stocks had been fully depleted, with armed clashes and road blockages preventing aid workers from reaching people (UNOCHA, 2023). In mid-September, a civil society figure in Dilling described conditions in Kadugli and the rest of the western region as ‘terrible, and getting worse’.³⁶

29 Author telephone interview with a South Kordofan-based academic, 22 June 2023.

30 The Kasha market is located in Om Jamina village. Information provided by a South Kordofan-based civil society organization, 7 March 2024. Author telephone interview with a South Kordofan-based civil society figure, 9 March 2024.

31 Information provided by a South Kordofan-based civil society organization, 7 March 2024. Author telephone interview with a South Kordofan-based civil society figure, 9 March 2024.

32 Author telephone interviews with two South Kordofan-based civil society figures and an international NGO official, 1 March 2024.

33 Author telephone interview with a South Kordofan-based academic, 14 May 2023.

34 Author telephone interview with a UN World Food Programme official, 27 June 2023. Radio Dabanga (2023b) reported that 180,000 people had arrived in South Kordofan as of June 2023.

35 This pressure on resources and services was already a factor following the displacement of 25,000 Nuba from Lagawa into SPLM-N areas in October 2022 after the RSF-backed Misseriya attack. Author telephone interview with a human rights researcher, 11 September 2023.

36 Author telephone interview with a civil society figure, 18 September 2023.

Post-coup, pre-conflict militarization

In the wake of the 2021 coup, both SAF and the RSF ramped up force numbers in South Kordofan, seemingly with an eye on securing access to gold mines and due to ongoing concern over backlash from Al Hilu's SPLA-N, which had not signed the October 2020 Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) that brought most other armed groups into the transitional government. The RSF had recruited in particular from the erstwhile PDF and other Arab militias of the Hawazma and Misseriya, reflecting a particular phenomenon in which fighters formerly of the PDF—a militia built to further an Islamist agenda—joined the RSF to fight their former comrades in SAF, itself freighted with a significant and influential Islamist cadre.³⁷ The RSF is reported to have strong links with more than 1,000 fighters affiliated with the Al Attawa militia of the Hawazma Baggara, along with strong ties to Shawabna and the Misseriya (Radio Dabanga, 2023a). Prior to the conflict between SAF and the RSF, these groups had received weapons from the RSF, and, with its support, were active in serious tribal conflicts, the worst of which saw the Misseriya Humr evict the entire population of Nuba from Lagawa.³⁸ When the conflict erupted in mid-April, Baggara militias that had not already joined the RSF were urged to do so.³⁹ The Bashir government's disregard for these Baggara groups in its final decade had generated disaffection and anger in Hawazma and Misseriya Humr communities in

South and West Kordofan.⁴⁰ The country's multiplying economic woes, and clear appeals from the Mahariya Reizegat to the collective Al Attawa identity, drove many young men and Baggara leaders to turn away from the NCP, Islamists, and the PDF, and towards the RSF.

SAF, by contrast, had been concerned that excessive numbers of new recruits would dilute fealty to the institution and constitute a potential threat to command and control.⁴¹ Rather, it repositioned troops to expand its presence at an existing base in Abu Jubaiyah in June 2021 after the collapse of JPA negotiations with the SPLM-N in Juba in late 2020.⁴² This militarization was corroborated by the government's declaration of a state of emergency in the state in February 2022, which had been renewed monthly since its inception but had done little for security in the state which itself had markedly worsened since the coup.⁴³ This, along with inevitable questions over the post-coup government's legitimacy became the pretext for the SPLM-N's refusal in January 2022 to renew its ceasefire arrangement with the government.⁴⁴ Until then, the ceasefire had been renewed by both sides every six months since the 2016 cessation of hostilities between the government and the SPLM/A-N.⁴⁵ In the wake of the coup, and having rejected the renewal of the ceasefire, both wings of the SPLA-N—those of Al Hilu and of Sovereign Council member Malik Agar—began to recruit.⁴⁶ Reflecting growing fears over insecurity in the state, civil society groups reported observing weapons

37 The PDF was officially disbanded by the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement but continued to fight in South Kordofan.

38 Author telephone interview with a South Kordofan-based academic, 14 May 2023. The RSF had sought to set up training camps in Abu Kershola in the eastern part of South Kordofan, though this plan faced strong backlash from communities in the area (Radio Dabanga, 2023a).

39 Author telephone interview with a South Kordofan-based NGO worker, 27 June 2023.

40 Author interviews with senior Misseriya Humr figures in Abyei, Al Fula, and Muglad, 2010–15, and with a West Kordofan state official, Khartoum, 12 October 2021.

41 Author interview with a confidential source, Khartoum, 10 March 2023.

42 SAF established a new *firga* (a base led by a general) at the Abu Jubaiyah base. Each *firga* has six *liwa* (major generals). Author telephone interview with former Sudanese government official, 27 June 2023.

43 This state of emergency was renewed on a monthly basis to allow the new, post-coup administration to learn and understand the security context of the state. Author interview with Hamid al Bashir, former South Kordofan governor, Khartoum, 21 March 2023.

44 The government unilaterally renewed this ceasefire after the October 2021 coup (*Sudan Tribune*, 2023). Confidential update seen by the author.

45 Author telephone interview with a senior humanitarian official, 30 June 2023. The SPLM-N did, however, issue positive statements concerning the country's December 2022 Framework Agreement.

46 Author telephone interview with a South Kordofan-based academic, 22 June 2023. The RSF had provided funding to several community leaders in South Kordofan to encourage them to turn away from Al Hilu and towards Agar's wing of the SPLM-N, angering Al Hilu and bringing the two wings close to conflict on several occasions. Confidential research document seen by the author, May 2020.

and ammunition moving into South Kordofan well before the outbreak of SAF–RSF conflict.⁴⁷

Ethnicization and reinvigoration of intercommunal tensions

South Kordofan state is characterized by significant ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity with Nuban groups and Arab tribes such as the Awlad Himaid, Hawazma, Kenana, and Misseriya living alongside groups such as the Bargo, Barno, and Fallata originating from western Africa. Hawazma from al-Fayd, Khor al-Delib, and Rahmania have taken up arms to fight alongside Mohammed Ibrahim Sheria, a Rawawga Hawazma and commander of an RSF unit.⁴⁸ Researchers in South Kordofan have found evidence that Misseriya youth have been mobilized, although clan divisions within the tribe illustrate the broader complexity of ethnicized mobilization in South Kordofan, with other Misseriya either supporting SAF or remaining neutral.⁴⁹ The ethnicization of the prolonged war reopened divisions between groups—because of mobilization along ethnic lines and new levels of economic duress—and weakened traditional mechanisms for peace and conflict resolution. Tribalization and ethnicization of the current conflict have been cultivated in particular by the RSF in its recruitment of Hawazma, Kenana, and Misseriya in South Kordofan, which stands to represent the most damaging long-term impact of the fighting in the state. This recruitment invoked Arab, pan-Sahelian tropes that appealed to members of the Al Attawa tribal umbrella, living in a region with ‘unprecedented security and humanitarian challenges’, according to a January 2023 briefing to the UN Security Council.⁵⁰ These tropes include a

strong racial element and the capture of land in South Kordofan for Arab economic use is a core principle. Well before the outbreak of conflict, Hemeti himself had worked assiduously to cultivate the loyalty of tribal leaders from these Baggara communities.⁵¹

Implications for international stakeholders

- The continued ethnicization of the larger conflict in Sudan will see the onset of conflict at the community level in South Kordofan, destroying fragile social fabric and entrenching conflict, making it far harder to resolve. The Nuba in South Kordofan have long sought greater autonomy from an oppressive, menacing Khartoum; the significant deterioration of intercommunal and interracial relations as a result of the war fuel hopes for greater independence and the prospective break-up of the Sudanese state.
- SPLA-N offensives against SAF risk, in the medium term, opening a new front in the conflict. The offensive also damages SAF’s ability to fight the increasingly emboldened RSF in other parts of the country, contributing to the national military balance of power between the two militaries. While SAF is currently simply too occupied with the existential fight against the RSF, any easing of this intra-military conflict may allow whichever side is in the ascendancy to turn towards South Kordofan and the SPLA-N. Crucially because of its earning power and the high cost of the ongoing conflict, gold is highly likely to be the subject of battles between armies and armed groups. South Kordofan has perhaps the highest concentrations of gold deposits in the country.

47 Confidential presentation by a civil society figure at a Chatham House event, 23 May 2023.

48 Confidential situational update report on the Sudan conflict by S4GS, 3 May 2023.

49 Confidential situational update report on the Sudan conflict by S4GS, 3 May 2023.

50 Confidential United Nations Office for West Africa briefing, 10 January 2023. For more on Al Attawa, see Prunier (2011) and the Small Arms Survey’s ‘HSBA Reference Portfolio: Sudan actors and events’. Author telephone interview with a South Kordofan-based academic and civil society figure, 14 June 2023. In the last serious Nuba–Arab conflict, in Lagawa in October 2022, Misseriya violently expelled 36,500 Nuba from the city with the support of the RSF. This conflict featured strong language and narratives declaring Lagawa ‘Arab’ land in which Nuba were not welcome. See UNOCHA (2022).

51 Key traditional leaders quickly sought to inure greater Kordofan to a widening of the SAF–RSF conflict. In West Kordofan, the Misseriya and Hamar Native Administration has stated that they do not wish to participate in fighting (confidential situational update reports on the Sudan conflict by S4GS, 26 April and 3 May 2023). Nuba and Hawazma from Dilling met early in the conflict to find ways to maintain peaceful relations (confidential situational update report on the Sudan conflict by S4GS, 3 May 2023).

- Increases in community-level or broader conflict between militaries in South Kordofan will impact South Sudan's stability as displaced persons are pushed southward and across the border. With almost 370,000 individuals having crossed from Sudan into South Sudan by mid-November 2023 (82.89 per cent of whom were classified as South Sudanese returnees), South Sudanese communities along the border with Sudan have already faced serious new pressures on their already shaky food and physical security.⁵² Cut off from all outside assistance, the South Kordofan population, previously reliant in large part on South Sudan for key foodstuffs and supplies, is already experiencing its own severe humanitarian pressures and the hunger season, beginning in October, and beyond may see the onset of an even more acute emergency humanitarian context in the state. ●

Abbreviations and acronyms

JPA	Juba Peace Agreement
NCP	National Congress Party
PDF	Popular Defence Forces
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SPLA-N	Sudan People's Liberation Army-North
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/ Army
SPLM-N	Sudan People's Liberation Movement- North
UAE	United Arab Emirates

⁵² Confidential UN report seen by the author, 13 November 2023.

References

- ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project). 2023. 'Sudan: Heightened Violence in Kordofan Region as More Militia Groups Step Into the Conflict—Situation Update | August 2023.' 11 August.
- Gouja, Ahmed. 2023. 'As Darfur Falls to the RSF, Where Is the Outrage at Their Atrocities?' *New Humanitarian*. 11 December.
- Michael, Maggie and Ryan McNeill. 2023. 'Sudan Refugees Detail Second Wave of Bloody Ethnic Purge by Arab Forces.' *Reuters Special Report*. 22 November.
- Monitor. 2022. '150 Killed in Two Days of Land Fight in Sudan.' 20 October.
- Prunier, Gérard. 2011. *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Radio Dabanga. 2023a 'Analyst: Two out of Three Scenarios Lead to Prolonged Civil War in Sudan.' 9 May.
- . 2023b. 'Nearly 180,000 Flee from Sudan Capital to Nuba Mountains.' 14 June.
- . 2023c. 'South Kordofan Reports of Raids, Rapes, and Robberies.' 20 June.
- Rondos, Alex. 2023. 'After Six Months of Civil War, What's the State of Play in Sudan?' *United States Institute of Peace*. 19 October.
- Save the Children. 2023. 'Sudan: More than 50,000 People Displaced within Kadugli as Town nears Siege Conditions.' *Press release*. 1 September.
- Sudan Akhbar*. 2023. 'South Kordofan: Hilu Mobilizes a Large Armed Force amid Fears' [in Arabic]. 9 June.
- Sudan Tribune*. 2023. 'Over 6,500 People Flee Renewed Clashes in Kadugli of South Kordofan: Reports.' 22 August.
- UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). 2022. 'Conflict in Al Lagowa Locality, West Kordofan.' *Flash Update No. 2*. 20 October.
- . 2023. 'UN Relief Chief: War and Hunger Could Destroy Sudan.' *Statement by Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator*. 25 August.
- USAID (United States Agency for International Development). 2023. 'Sudan—Complex Emergency.' *Fact Sheet No. 7*. 19 May.
- Walsh, Declan, Christoph Koettl, and Eric Schmitt. 2023. 'Talking Peace in Sudan, the U.A.E. Secretly Fuels the Fight.' *New York Times*, 29 September.
- Younis, Ahmed. 2023. "'Al-Hilu Forces" Consider the Sudanese Army in South Kordofan an "Occupying Force" [in Arabic].' 25 June.

This Situation Update was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.



About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey is a centre for applied knowledge dedicated to preventing and reducing illicit small arms proliferation and armed violence. The Survey informs policy and practice through a combination of data, evidence-based knowledge, authoritative resources and tools, and tailored expert advice and training, and by bringing together practitioners and policymakers.

The Survey is an associated programme of the Geneva Graduate Institute, located in Switzerland, and has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, criminology, and database and programme management. It collaborates with a network of researchers, practitioners, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

The Survey's activities and outputs are made possible through core support as well as project funding. A full list of current donors and projects can be accessed via the Small Arms Survey website. For more information, please visit: www.smallarmssurvey.org.

About the HSBA project

The Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA) for Sudan and South Sudan is a multiyear project administered by the Small Arms Survey since 2006. It was developed in cooperation with the Canadian government, the United Nations Mission in Sudan, the United Nations Development Programme, and a wide array of international and Sudanese partners. Through the active generation and dissemination of timely, empirical research, the project supports violence reduction initiatives, including disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes and incentive schemes for civilian arms collection, as well as security sector reform and arms control interventions across Sudan and South Sudan. The HSBA also offers policy-relevant advice on the political and economic drivers of conflict and insecurity. Publications in Arabic, English, and French are available at: www.smallarmssurvey.org.

Credits

Project coordinator: Kristopher Carlson

Production coordinators: Olivia Denonville and Katie Lazaro

Editor: Raga Makawi

Fact-checker: Natacha Cornaz

Copy-editor: Alessandra Allen

Design: Julian Knott

Layout: Rick Jones

Proofreader: Stephanie Huitson



Contact details

Small Arms Survey, Maison de la Paix, Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

t +41 22 908 5777, e info@smallarmssurvey.org

www.smallarmssurvey.org