

Popular Struggles and Elite Co-optation: The Nuer White Army in South Sudan's Civil War

By John Young



NORWEGIAN MINISTRY
OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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List of abbreviations

ARCSS	Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
AU	African Union
CoISS	(African Union) Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
PoC	Protection of Civilians
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPLM-IO	SPLM in Opposition
SSDF	South Sudan Defence Forces
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan

About the author

John Young is a Canadian with a PhD in political science who has worked in the Horn of Africa since 1986 as a teacher, journalist, peace monitor, consultant, and academic. He has published two books, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: Tigray People's Liberation Front 1975 to 1991* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) and *The Fate of Sudan: Origins and Consequences of a Flawed Peace Process* (Zed Books, 2012), as well as numerous articles on regional conflicts, peace processes, and governance.

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I. Introduction and key findings

The white armies¹ of the Eastern Nuer figured prominently in Sudan's second civil war (1983–2005), were a major source of instability during the transitional and independence period (2005–13), and served as the main fighting force of the opposition to the government in the South Sudanese civil war that broke out in December 2013. Despite the long and significant role of the white armies in these conflicts, no major studies of them have been published and only a handful of less than comprehensive research papers. As a result, the role, interests, organization, hierarchy, relationship to other political and military actors, and general attitudes of white army fighters are poorly understood. Major anthropological and historical studies of the white armies are needed to help peace mediators, the South Sudanese government, and development agencies understand a group that is critical to war, peace, and stability in South Sudan. Unfortunately, the present study can only make a minor contribution to meeting these larger needs.

What this study will do is review the limited literature on the history, organization, and operation of the white army in the context of the civil war that erupted in December 2013. There will be no attempt to provide a comprehensive history of the white army in this war; nor is this an anthropological or sociological study of Nuer society. The present research has two main components. First, based primarily on interviews, it provides a broad picture of the contemporary white army and attempts to give its fighters a human face. Second, and in particular, the motivation of white army fighters, their understanding of the war and the peace agreement, what they want for the future of South Sudan, their response to accusations of human rights abuses, and other issues will be examined.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)-led peace process has focused on meeting the interests of elites in the Government of South Sudan and the SPLM in Opposition (SPLM-IO) even though IGAD mediators have repeatedly accused these elites of being less than representative of the

country or even their claimed constituents. During the first peace process (December 2013 to March 2015) mediators attempted to bring elements of South Sudanese civil society and political parties other than the government, SPLM-IO, and former detainees into the peace process, but not the white army. For a variety of reasons these efforts failed. A second and expanded IGAD initiative followed, but it did not attempt to bring other actors into the process (Young, 2015). Sustained pressure led the Government of South Sudan's President Salva Kiir to make a much qualified commitment to the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) in August 2015. As explained elsewhere (Young, 2015), little pressure was needed to bring the SPLM-IO to sign the peace agreement.

If the agreement is to be sustainable it needs the acceptance of non-elite groups, particularly the white army, which led the military campaign against the government and was coopted by the SPLM-IO leadership in pursuit of the latter's political ends. While the white army was linked to the SPLM-IO during the war, the relationship is complex, and as this research will make clear, it should not be assumed that the interests of the white army fighters are necessarily represented by the SPLM-IO leadership or have been addressed in the ARCSS, even if the IGAD negotiations were based on that assumption. Indeed, the argument developed here is that the SPLM-IO leadership was never able to control the white army, SPLM-IO claims to represent its interests in the peace talks should not be uncritically accepted, and the white army remains today what it was at the outset of the conflict—a largely autonomous organization. One of the objectives of this study, then, is—within the constraints of time, available finances, and a less than ideal sample—to attempt to understand how white army fighters view the war and assess their attitudes to the peace agreement and peace process at the time of writing.

The second component of this study will take up issues of a 'technical' nature, in particular a comparison with other irregular South Sudanese forces, the organization of the white army, its leadership and hierarchy, its links to SPLM-IO regular forces, its components, recent internal changes, and the way in which it fought government forces.

The conflicts in which the Nuer white army is engaged are both local and national: conflict typically takes place at the local level, but its origins and

drivers are often to be found at the national or even international level, if it is appreciated that internationally conducted peace processes both cause and shape conflicts. The fact that both the actors in these conflicts and those observing them often contend that they are solely the result of the actions of disaffected youth is to be refuted, and this study will make clear that despite the often brutal behaviour of its fighters, the white army's actions were the product of legitimate grievances and, when deconstructed, can be seen to have a political content.

At the outset it should be made clear that the term 'white army' (or 'white armies' when describing specific sub-components) is only used to distinguish it from the 'black army', or regular forces, with white having a positive connotation and black a negative connotation, as befitting the negative view white army fighters have of the regular forces. Moreover, and contrary to widely held views, the 'white army' does not get its name from ash used by its fighters.

There are reports of the existence of white army forces in Unity state, and Major General Peter Gadet said that such forces do exist.² This warrants further investigation that the present research was unable to undertake because it was restricted to the Eastern Nuer. However, the available evidence suggests that the youth forces in Unity state cannot be considered to be a white army as the term is understood in the east. This is because SPLM-IO regular forces in Unity state had a major role in organizing the youth, the local community had little or no control over them, and they were subsequently integrated into the regular SPLM-IO forces, all of which distinguish them from the white army of eastern Upper Nile. Moreover, the Nuer of Unity state—and particularly the large Bul clan—were divided over the war and some of their key leaders led the state government and played a leading role, alongside the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), in the repeated and devastating assaults on Nuer civilians living in southern Unity state.

The author wrote an earlier paper on the white army for the Small Arms Survey (Young, 2007b). However, another study was deemed necessary to update knowledge, particularly in light of the December 2013 war; review recent studies of the white army; consider internal changes affecting it; take up issues not addressed in the first paper; and consider the views of white army fighters at a time when the peace process is lagging and there is a danger of a

return to war in which the white army might again assume a leading role. The present study is also based on the conviction that the interests of the white army fighters need to be addressed, even though they are poorly articulated and understood, if there is to be any hope for sustainable peace in South Sudan.

The present research is largely based on field interviews carried out between 25 January and 16 February 2016 in Gambella, Ethiopia's most western region, at a time when many white army fighters who also double as cattle herders can be found in the region. The majority of these interviews were with white army fighters, but elders, former fighters, and SPLM-IO officials were also interviewed. The focus was on white army fighters from Greater Akobo, Greater Fanjak, and Greater Naser, with fewer fighters from the central region, who are less likely to be found in Gambella. Some chiefs were interviewed, including two who were white army fighters. Although women play a supportive role, the white army has no women fighters, and thus few were interviewed. Finally, some academics at the University of Gambella were interviewed during the course of this research.

In addition, interviews were carried out in Addis Ababa and previously conducted meetings with white army fighters will sometimes be referred to. All interviewees were informed of the nature of the research and guaranteed anonymity, except in a few cases of senior white army commanders, where permission was requested to record their names. While carrying out the interviews in South Sudan would have been preferable, security conditions and white army fighters' suspicions of researchers arriving from Juba by plane, as well as Ethiopian government opposition to foreigners crossing the border to South Sudan, suggested that Gambella would be a better venue—the more so because the interviews were conducted at a time when Nuer pastoralists (who comprise most of the white army fighters) bring their cattle to the border area of Gambella, and thus many were available to be interviewed. One obstacle to conducting the research, however, was that the visit to Gambella corresponded with conflict between Ethiopian Anwak and Nuer, which caused tensions and led to road closures in the region and security problems in Gambella town. While security conditions made the conduct of research outside the town impossible, they did not limit the number or diversity of interviewees, and, indeed, by forcing many people to stay in the town they made the author's

task easier. The research was carried out with the knowledge of the SPLM-IO leadership, which never attempted to influence this study.

The interviews were informal and of a qualitative nature, and while general themes emerged and are taken up below, the intent was to encourage the white army fighters and others to freely express their views on a range of subjects. A central objective of the research was thus to provide a rounded picture of the white army fighters and consider them in the context of their communities. This approach serves to challenge the one-dimensional view of white army fighters as mindless, bloodthirsty, and compliant tools of SPLM-IO leader Riek Machar—a view that reached virtually hysterical proportions in the first few days of the war when the white army captured Bor and began to march on Juba.

Among the paper's key findings:

- The war of the Eastern Nuer white armies against the Government of South Sudan was a popular war that had the almost complete support of the communities from which the fighters came and involved very little outside support.
- The white armies of the Eastern Nuer can be distinguished from other community-level youth-based self-defence groups and militias that developed in South Sudan by their measure of autonomy from external military and political forces, lack of a formal military hierarchy, internal mobilization, strong links to the fighters' communities, and capacity to fight beyond these communities for broader objectives.
- The 1991 attack on Bor led by Riek Machar marks the birth of the Nuer white army, and that attack involved widespread abuse of civilians and looting that were motivated by deep-seated hatred of the Dinka and a desire for revenge. White army attacks on government-held towns in Jonglei and Upper Nile in the wake of the mid-December 2013 killing of Nuer civilians in Juba, which white army fighters held to be the responsibility of Dinka in general and President Salva Kiir in particular, involved similar motives.
- It is common to attribute the December 2013 war to a power struggle within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) leadership, and both the IGAD-led negotiations and the Arusha SPLM reconciliation talks were based on this assumption, and thus have focused on elite power sharing and SPLM reconciliation. However, not one white army fighter interviewed during the

course of this research said that this was his motivation for fighting, and nor did any of them say they fought because Riek Machar was removed from the vice presidency or to gain positions for Nuer in a post-conflict government. Without exception, the fighters said the reason they fought was revenge for the killing of Nuer civilians and family members in Juba in mid-December 2013 and to free members of their families from government-occupied towns.

- Although SPLM-IO leader Riek Machar claimed in testimony to the African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan (AU CoISS) that from 17 December 2013 he was in control of all the armed opposition forces, which necessarily includes the white army, this claim is not borne out by this study. An examination of the history of the white armies going back to 1991 suggests that neither he nor anyone else can be said to control them, and nor did Riek or his representatives have any role in the mobilization of the white army after the Juba killings. Lam Akol's statement to the commission that Riek 'took over a rebellion that was not his' (AU CoISS, 2014, p. 131) is thus an accurate assessment.
- It is the white army and not the black or regular forces of the SPLM-IO that largely captured the government-controlled towns of Jonglei and Upper Nile, but the fighters' lack of interest in sustained military operations meant that they soon returned home, leaving the towns to the regular SPLM-IO forces, who proved incapable of holding them.
- Although attacks by white army fighters on government-held towns has led to the popular perception of them as wild, violent, and beyond control, in their home areas they have generally been well behaved, followed the direction of elders and the civil authorities, and are being used by local SPLM-IO administrations as an important element in preserving security.
- The fact that Salva Kiir, whom the white army fighters hold responsible for the killing of Nuer civilians in Juba, remains the president of South Sudan and the continuing presence of SPLA soldiers in the white army's homeland means that, irrespective of the signing of the ARCSS, white army fighters do not recognize that the war has ended, at best only a ceasefire exists, and in the present circumstances there can be no consideration of a civilian disarmament process, which is critical to any sustainable peace.

- The SPLM-IO has made no effort to politically educate the white army fighters and as a result most of them fought simply out of a desire for revenge and hatred of the Dinka. But the limitations of this approach are becoming clear and the fighters are not happy with the outcome of the war, are increasingly distrustful of the SPLM-IO leadership and the peace agreement, and a minority have concluded they have been betrayed and want to resume the war. 🗨️

II. Background

Community self-defence groups based on armed youth have developed in many parts of South Sudan and bear a resemblance to the white army, but they are also different in crucial ways. Examples include the Gulweng and Titweng among the Dinka, the Monyimiji among the Lataka of Eastern Equatoria, and the Arrow Boys among the Azande of Western Equatoria. Sudan's second civil war led to the proliferation of tribal-based militias throughout the country, particularly in Greater Equatoria, to protect the civilian population and community assets from the SPLA and the Dinka herders that followed in their wake. Some of these militias were subsequently supported by the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and were integrated into the South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF).

The SPLA trained and commanded the Dinka Titweng (Pendle, 2015), unlike the white army, which was neither trained nor led by the SPLM-IO. According to Pendle (2015), competition developed between SPLA elites over ultimate authority over the Titweng, but given the white army's emphasis on autonomy, there could be no such competition among SPLM-IO commanders for control of it. Pendle (2015) also reports that the SPLA influence was such as to undermine the authority of the Dinka chiefs over the Titweng, but this too is not evident among the white army. The picture that emerges from Pendle and other sources is of the Titweng as a militia linked to the SPLA, but largely operating at the local level and not involving large numbers of fighters. The Nuer white army was not linked organically to the SPLM-IO regular forces, did not restrict its activities to its fighters' home areas, and involved very large armies, all of which will be expanded on below.

Johnson Olony organized a Shilluk militia, the Agwelek, in 2009 after Dinka displaced the inhabitants of his hometown of Canal, but, unlike the Nuer white army, this force was organized from the outside, developed a formal hierarchy and system of ranks, and its fighters did not own the weapons they used.³ Moreover, contrary to the Equatorian tribal militias or the Agwelek, the white army has zealously protected its independence.

The Arrow Boys, which recently adopted the name South Sudan National Liberation Movement, may represent the closest comparison to the Nuer white army, because it was developed by the youth to defend community assets, particularly from the Lord's Resistance Army, and while strongly influenced by the elders, never developed a military hierarchy or was formally linked to another political or military force. With the support of former Western Equatoria governor Joseph Bakosoro, the Arrow Boys assumed a more political character by late 2015 and began to carry out attacks against the SPLA. However, unlike the white army, the Arrow Boys are not known to have conducted military operations outside their home area and also received outside support in their mobilization.

It is noteworthy that neither Evans Pritchard, in his classical anthropological studies of the Nuer (Pritchard, 1940), nor even Sharon Hutchinson in her major study, *Nuer Dilemmas*, published much later (Hutchinson, 1996), makes any reference to the white army, even though both consider the role of the Nuer in war at some length. Nor do studies of Sudan's first civil war refer to the white army.

More than most peoples in South Sudan, the Nuer place a high value on military prowess. Pastoralism appears to be part of the explanation for Nuer militarism; in addition, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the lands of the Eastern Nuer fell between the Ethiopian and Ottoman empires and were largely lawless. Ethiopian emperor Menelik imported weapons to fend off colonial encroachments and defend the country against threatening neighbours like the Mahdi and Khalifa from Sudan. The Eastern Nuer acquired some of the guns from this trade and developed a taste for them, and they became powerful symbols of manhood. These weapons did not spread in large numbers to the Western Nuer, where in any case the local chiefs were able to exert more control over their youth than was evident in the east.

The absence of law and order in the eastern Nuerlands continued for some years after the advent of British colonialism and, indeed, it was one of the last areas in Sudan to be pacified. Even after Sudan's independence in 1956, government authority was limited in parts of eastern Upper Nile, and this has continued to the present. Consequently, eastern Upper Nile became the staging ground for the Akobo mutiny of 1975, the Ayod mutiny of 1983, and that of Bor

in the same year, which gave birth to the SPLA (Adeba, 2015). Despite the spread of weapons and these rebellions, it was not until the outbreak of the SPLA insurgency in 1983 and the military support that the SPLA received from the Ethiopian Derg that significant numbers of Nuer youth began to acquire modern weapons (Skedsmo, 2003).

The lineage groups of Nuer youth had been important and—like all of Nuer society—these groups had a strong military ethos. But lineage arrangements among the Nuer decayed and were replaced by *burnam*, or youth self-defence groups, and it was only with their decline that Nuer youth began developing white armies. According to Sharon Hutchinson and Jok Madut (1999, p. 11),

The Dec in boor or White Army consisted of loosely organized groups of armed Nuer youth who assumed the responsibility of protecting local herds during the dry season. The White Army was an indigenous institution that developed out of an earlier form of Nuer youth brigade known as burnam (or bunaam) which first emerged among the Eastern Jikeny and Lou Nuer during the first civil war (1955–72).

Burnam is a word borrowed from the Anwok that dates from before the first Sudan civil war and refers to a group of youth from the same clan who come together to defend community assets, primarily cattle herds. Some of these groups took on a more militant form during the early years of the second civil war and were absorbed into the SPLA. The white army as it presently exists took form in the course of the Riek Machar-led Nasir Faction attack on Bor in 1991, and according to multiple sources the name simply distinguishes it from the black or regular army. Although the majority of Riek’s attacking force in 1991 were Lou, the term ‘white army’ was quickly adopted by all the Eastern Nuer clans. The term *burnam* still has a general meaning and is also sometimes used to refer to a leader of the white army.

More research is needed, but it appears that Nuer militarism, combined with growing insecurity and the predations of the SPLA, which was more often viewed as an army of occupation than as liberators in Greater Upper Nile, as well as large numbers of weapons made available to Riek Machar by the Government of Sudan after he defected from Garang, formed the basis for the formation of the white army. While some of these weapons were sold, Riek

distributed most of them to the youth of the Lou, Gawar, and Eastern Jikany clans to protect their cattle and other assets from the SPLA. The Lou are largely found in Akobo, Nyirol, and Wuror; and the Gawar around Ayod; while the Eastern Jikany generally inhabit the area along the Sobat River near the Ethiopian border. Only a small number of weapons went to Riek's home state of Unity. The greater authority of the traditional authorities appear to be part of the explanation for this, but Riek's rebellion also served to cement his relationship with Anyanya II and its leader, Paulino Matiep, from the powerful Bul clan, which had opposed the SPLA since its inception in 1983, and with SAF support Paulino controlled much of the state. The white army used the weapons acquired through Riek in inter-clan and inter-tribal fighting. This was particularly common when the Lou—whose lands are poorly watered—moved their cattle during the dry season into the lands of the Eastern Jikany and Bor Dinka.

The Eastern Nuer, particularly the Lou, and a small component from the Duk clan of the Dinka, who are culturally close to the Nuer, participated in the November 1991 attack on Bor, the heartland of SPLA leader John Garang. The attack was led by a professional officer, Simon Gatwitch (who much later became the SPLM-IO chief of staff), and included upwards of 30,000 white army fighters, but Riek had no role in its mobilization. Riek intended to weaken the resolve of the Bor Dinka by showing that Garang could not defend his own people, but this objective was probably secondary for white army fighters, whose primary focus was on the theft of thousands of cattle and other movable property, as well as the killing of civilians. Revenge also figured in the motivation for the Bor attack, since many Nuer were angered by the killing of Samuel Gai Tut and other Nuer Anyanya II leaders by Garang's followers, as well as Lou SPLA officers in Bahr el Ghazal.

The Dinka civilian killings were made possible because of the contempt the two peoples held for each other. The Nuer looked down on the Dinka and their military skills, while the Dinka considered themselves to be culturally superior and 'men of men' (Pritchard, 1940, quoted in Adeba, 2015). In the Nuer language the Dinka are called *jeing*, which can be translated as 'slave', and is due to their claimed submission to various powers and their employment by the Nuer as farm labourers (the Nuer call themselves *naath*, or human being). The attack on Bor was of a different order from those that had preceded

it in terms of the number of fighters mobilized, cattle stolen, people killed, and the way it was to shape Southern Sudanese politics for decades. Although Riek has repeatedly and publicly accepted responsibility for these actions, there is little reason to think that he actually controlled the forces he unleashed.

While Dinka and Nuer typically 'identify more strongly with kinship and clans than with ethnicity, and inter-communal conflicts usually take place between groups at this level' (Bredlid and Arensen, 2014, p. 3), in the Bor attack ethnicity came to the fore. In addition, the attack stimulated an intensified cycle of Dinka–Nuer ethnic conflict; increased the militarization of both peoples; and led to the establishment of the Dinka Titweng, or cattle guards, to protect community assets from Nuer raiders and Arab nomads. This and subsequent attacks also made clear the white army's capacity to shift to an offensive mode, operate outside its home areas, mobilize for wars in alliance with regular forces, and pursue political objectives, even if its fighters were not always conscious of the political implications of their actions.

It was the Bor attack that gained the white army a lasting reputation for being ruthless, cattle thieves, murderers, beyond the control of government, and tools of Riek Machar. Some of these notions will be addressed later in this study, but it is important to note here that the white army has always valued its autonomy and self-rule; its leaders are elected by their own clan members; and it, not outside forces, decides if and when it will go to war. Strategy and vision were not the concerns of parochially minded youth with little education whose principal concern was the welfare of their cattle herds, and they were ill-suited for long battles. Then as now, the white army could not fight without support from its fighters' local communities, which supplied them with food and arranged to care for their cattle when the fighters joined military campaigns.

Although the mainstream view holds the second civil war (1983–2005) to be a southern insurgency against successive northern governments, during the latter years the conflict was dominated by struggles between a Dinka-dominated SPLA and a Nuer-dominated SSDF, which was closely aligned with the white army and supported by SAF (Young, 2006). The white army continued to fight the SPLA even after Riek returned to the SPLM in 2002, thus making clear the limits of his control over its fighters and the endurance of anti-Dinka sentiments among the Nuer.

The SSDF proved the most effective among various forces in aligning with the white army, even though it did not have the SPLA's access to weaponry and logistics. The areas it occupied were also unable to count on food aid from Operation Lifeline Sudan, which often proved crucial for the SPLA in gaining the acceptance of local people, because the SSDF was held to be aligned with SAF and thus the Government of Sudan. Nonetheless, the SSDF and its allied white army forces controlled much of Greater Upper Nile at the war's end and probably had the support of most Nuer. A number of senior SSDF commanders, such as Chayot Manyang in Maiuit, Gordon Kong and Garouth Gatkouth in Nasir, Chol Gahga in Mading, Gabriel Tang and Thomas Maboir in Fanjak, and Simon Gatwitch in Yuai, stand out for their ability to inspire and work with their respective white army components (Young, 2007b), but they were never able to control or even direct them. These commanders continued to enjoy prestige with the white army in the December 2013 war. Indeed, while dressed up as a political contest, the December 2013 war bore a resemblance to the previous war, with the SPLM-IO military leadership largely made up of former SSDF generals, most of the anti-government combatants drawn from the Nuer white army, and their opponents a Dinka-dominated SPLA (Young, 2015).

Because the second civil war had increasingly assumed the form of a south-south war, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) did not bring the expected peace, and it was only with the signing of the Juba Declaration on 8 January 2006 between Paulino Matiep, representing the SSDF, and President Salva Kiir, representing the Government of South Sudan—which called for the SSDF's absorption into the SPLA—that a sustainable peace was possible (Young, 2006). However, the failure to satisfactorily implement the Juba Declaration (which cannot be considered here) became a root cause of the war that broke out in December 2013.

Another problem that came to the fore at this time was the disarmament of a host of irregular or nominally civilian forces in the country, the most important being the various components of the white army. With the SSDF being integrated into the SPLA as a result of the Juba Declaration, the Nuer white army became increasingly vulnerable. While the national government insisted on monopolizing the use of violence in the country, the cattle herders of the white

army were often not prepared to give up their weapons in an environment of continuing insecurity, particularly to the SPLA, which they had long distrusted and frequently fought. Moreover, the respect and power the cattle herders had in their communities were dependent on their retaining their weapons. Villagers such as those the author interviewed along the Sobat River in 2006 complained about insecurity, cattle thefts, and rapes committed by gun-wielding youth who could not be controlled by the traditional authorities or the largely non-existent organs of the central state (Young, 2007a). Moreover, using guns to acquire cattle that could then be used to pay dowries undermined the authority of the elders and proved to be highly disruptive of Nuer society. Some white army fighters, particularly among the Eastern Jikany, did turn over their weapons to the SPLA, but found that it could not ensure their security, and as a result they frequently rearmed themselves.

The problem came to a head in 2006 when the SPLA launched a major campaign to disarm the Lou white army after it refused to voluntarily hand over its weapons (Young, 2007b). Because Riek Machar was held to have a special relationship with the Lou, since they made up most of his fighters in the 1991 Bor attack, he met with and tried to convince them to turn over their weapons. Once again he failed, and as a result the SPLA began a campaign that not only involved disarming the youth, but also punishing the civilians presumed to support them and taking the latter's cattle as a source of food. Initially the white army held the upper hand, but it was no match for the SPLA over the longer term, and it was decisively defeated in Motot, north-central Fanjak, in May 2006, after which the youth looted their own community and fled the area. At the time the author concluded that it was a mistake to view the white army solely as a security problem, and that

a failure to confront effectively the dissatisfaction, poverty, and the lack of opportunities . . . could give rise to new cycle of violence that the CPA was meant to end (Young, 2007b, p. 24).

Indeed, although there were more civilian disarmament campaigns in Nuerland and elsewhere in South Sudan, the SPLA was never able to provide security, clan- and ethnic-based fighting continued, and the causes of the widespread dissatisfaction that fuelled the white army were never addressed.

However violent the internal conflicts of 2006–09 were, those that took place in Jonglei after 2009 were even more deadly. The worst of this fighting involved the Lou and Murle, but according to a Small Arms Survey brief, the status of the Lou fighting force was not clear, because some experts said that it consisted of the white army, and others that the fighters were simply *bunam*, or youths (Small Arms Survey, 2012). Interviews carried out with white army leaders in Gambella give weight to the notion that this fighting force was indeed the white army. Paulino Kor, who fought in the Murle campaign and served as a senior white army commander in the war against the government, was in no doubt that the Lou fighting force was the white army.⁴ In addition, this force was organized in a similar way to the white army and was led by Bordoang Leeh of Uror county, who was also to lead the Lou white army during the SPLM-IO insurgency.

While the civilian fighting in Jonglei between 2009 and 2012 suggests continuity from earlier fighting, unlike the post-15 December 2013 conflict it was not directed against the SPLA or Bor Dinka, and there were unconfirmed reports of the SPLA assisting the Lou (HRW, 2013). It was also in this period that the Nuer prophet Dak Kueth came to the fore, articulated Lou anger at Murle attacks, and, according to one analyst, helped to organize the white army response (Thomas, 2015). Once again Riek Machar in his capacity as vice president, Nuer leader, and one-time leader of the Lou took up the task of trying to convince Lou raiders to desist from attacking the Murle in meetings with them on 28 and 29 December 2011 in Pibor and Likuangole, respectively, but the youth refused his appeal. According to one of the current white army leaders who was at the meetings Riek addressed, his appeal was rejected because Lou leaders representing the entire community had previously informed the government that it had a six-month deadline to stop endemic Murle raiding, and since the raids had continued, they were resolved to deal with the problem on their own.⁵ When asked to compare the war against the Murle and the insurgency against the government, one white army fighter claimed in the first case it was all about cows and in the second it was about power, but it appears to be more complicated than this.

The underlying causes of Lou discontent have remained remarkably similar over a long period of time: clashes over grazing land and water points and

the degradation of pastures, which cause great stress since cattle are the primary source of wealth and needed for dowries; some of the lowest levels of development and infrastructure in South Sudan; insecurity; the politicization of the conflict; and—unique to this conflict—widespread allegations of Murle abductions of children. Another factor that would also come to the fore in the December 2013 civil war was the assistance provided to Nuer fighters by the diaspora, which involved rallying supporters internationally, raising money, and young Lou Nuer men from abroad joining the fighting force. Apart from the unprecedented scale of the fighting (which sometimes seemed to be a mini-war), what stands out in the Lou–Murle fighting was the targeting of women and children, which made clear that the primary objective of the fighting was not the usual acquisition of cattle, but ethnic hatred (Small Arms Survey, 2012). In response a state-wide civilian disarmament campaign was announced—Operation Restore Peace—which began in March 2012. The campaign was largely directed against the Murle, who had been ignored in five previous rounds of disarmament, and the SPLA brutalized the civilian population even more than in other disarmament initiatives (HRW, 2013). This precipitated a full-scale insurgency led by David Yau Yau in which the SPLA was ultimately defeated.

This all too briefly sums up the conflict in Greater Upper Nile on the eve of the outbreak of civil war in December 2013, particularly Jonglei, which suffered the worst violence. The white army fighters can readily be viewed as being a perpetuator of these conflicts, but they and their communities were also victims of the degraded conditions in the territory, which were a result of the misrule of the SPLM and the security failures of the SPLA, as well as general conditions of uneven development. 📍

III. The December 2013 civil war

A full consideration of the underlying causes of the South Sudan civil war that broke out on 15 December 2013 is beyond the scope of this paper, and what is of interest here is what white army fighters think was the cause of the war—or, to put it another way, why they took up arms against the government. Also of interest are indications that the fighters' perceptions of the war changed over time. The focus of most media and academic analyses has been on the precipitating or immediate causes of the war, and generally they are consistent with a report that concluded that

Political divisions within the ruling party . . . quickly devolved into violence in the capital Juba, prompting army defections and civilian mobilization. . . . Brutal targeting of civilians along ethnic lines has resulted in condemnation from the international community (Breidlid and Arensen, 2014, p. 3).

Another report acknowledged the importance of what it called the 'Juba massacre', but concluded that,

political differences between two rival factions of the . . . SPLM . . . degenerated into a full-scale civil war. While the primary causes were political in nature, the conflict acquired ethnic overtones that pitted South Sudan's two largest ethnic groups, the Dinka and the Nuer, against each other (Adeba, 2014, p. 5).

Many analyses and media reports could be quoted, almost all of which attributed the primary cause of the war to struggles within the SPLM leadership.

The above two quotations are notable because they are drawn from academic studies of the white army, and both fail to adequately consider why white army fighters fought the government, how they conceived of the war, how they were mobilized, and what they wanted out of the war. This is surprising, because mobilizing peasants and herders to fight a sustained war based on political objectives has proved to be an extremely difficult and rare undertaking in Africa. Although of enormous interest, the reasons why the Nuer youth

became involved in the war are rarely considered in media reports and academic studies, nor were they addressed in the IGAD peace negotiations.

In response to questions about the cause of the war and why they fought against the government, the answers of the fighters were unambiguous and virtually unanimous: they went to war because of the SPLA's killing of Nuer civilians in Juba in mid-December 2013. The fighters' sense of disbelief, anger, and hurt because of this event mirrored that of other Nuer. Although analysts have commonly held that the SPLA's killing of Nuer civilians was due to competition between Dinka and Nuer elites over control of the country, only one fighter supported this view.⁶ But even he made clear that he was motivated to fight because of the Juba killings.

The fighters were adamant that they were not mobilized by outside actors such as Riek Machar or anyone from the SPLM-IO leadership. At the initial stage of the war the fighters almost spontaneously came together in solidarity after the events in Juba out of a desire for revenge and to rescue family and friends deemed to be at risk in government-controlled towns. Indeed, interviewed fighters frequently sneered at the suggestion that any outside group had to mobilize them to fight. A chief said that 'Anyone who said that is lying'.⁷ A young Eastern Jikany fighter said, with the support of his comrades, 'Riek doesn't like to fight; he doesn't like the army',⁸ and thus he could not have played a role in their mobilization, and in any case he was nowhere near them in Nasir when they began their insurgency against the government.

This is significant, because Riek claimed in testimony to the AU CoISS that he was in control of the armed opposition forces, including the white army, from the time he reached Panyagor near Bor on 17 December 2013 (AU CoISS, 2014, p. 126). Riek also convinced IGAD that he was in control of all the forces fighting the government, and on that basis was invited to participate in the peace negotiations in Addis Ababa and to represent those forces. Perhaps realizing the problem, Riek acknowledged in an interview that the white army is 'definitely difficult to control, their discipline is wanting' (Davison, 2014). White army fighters were never asked about, informed about, or gave their consent in any meaningful way to being represented in the IGAD negotiations by Riek and the SPLM-IO. Lam Akol's testimony to the AU CoISS that Riek 'took over a rebellion that was not his' (AU CoISS, 2014, p. 131) is a more

convincing explanation than taking Riek at his word, as the AU and IGAD have done.

Although the commission found that ‘ethnicized killings’ of Nuer were linked to ‘state policy’ (AU CoISS, 2014, p. 225), to date no process is under way to take up and much less bring closure to the issue. Crucially, but without giving any reasons, the CoISS rejected the allegation universally believed by white army fighters that their community was the victim of genocide. Moreover, the commission concluded that reconciliation could not be achieved until ‘those with the greatest responsibility for atrocities at the highest level should be brought to account’ (AU CoISS, 2014, p. 300). However, the repeated refusal of the AU Peace and Security Commission to release the report and, when it was finally published, to release a crucial section that identifies those accused of the killings exacerbates the problem and contradicts the commission’s own findings. As a result, the problems of what caused the war, why the mass killing of Nuer in Juba took place, and the reasons why the report rejected the conclusion that the ‘ethnicized killings’ did not constitute genocide rages in the Nuer community. The CoISS has contributed nothing to the resolution of these burning issues. Moreover, the problem is exacerbated by the refusal of the international community to recognize that in spite of the undoubted crimes subsequently committed by the opposition Nuer forces (particularly the white army), it was the mass killing of Nuer civilians in Juba that precipitated the war. This was made abundantly clear in interviews with white army fighters, who never once referred to disputes among the SPLM leadership as the reason they launched their insurgency against the government. Ignoring or downplaying controversial issues has long been a feature of peacemaking in Sudan and South Sudan (Young, 2012), but it invariably makes the problem worse.

While the initial white army attacks and capture of Bor and Malakal were clearly driven by revenge, the motives of the fighters—at least those from Upper Nile—subsequently became more nuanced. Upon returning home from capturing and withdrawing from Malakal in January 2014, the fighters were accused by their community of abandoning fellow Nuer in the Upper Nile capital to abuse by the returning SPLA and the SPLM government. Duly chastised, they returned to capture Malakal again in February in a particularly bloody engagement, but this time their motivation was revenge for the Juba

killings combined with the perceived continuing abuse of Nuer and the need to free the Nuer in Malakal. However, there is some indication, which is strongly argued by SPLM-IO Sobat governor Duor Tut, that white army fighters subsequently began to assume an increasingly critical stance regarding the war that has led them to consider it from a more political perspective.⁹ 🗨️

IV. Authority and hierarchy in the white army

Consistent with Evans Pritchard's (1940) descriptions of the Nuer system of government in the last century, decision making and leadership in the Nuer white army are very decentralized. The army is organized on a clan basis with the leader of the clan the primary leader, but then proceeds downward through various sub-clans, while at each level representatives are selected on the basis of consensus among that particular group. No formal ranks exist. Popular mobilization, meetings, and support, such as food for the fighters, are organized at the sub-clan level. The white army exists wholly outside the structures of the black (or regular) SPLM-IO army and, indeed, some fighters barely acknowledge the latter's existence, because it has few members (mostly ex-SPLA soldiers), and they (the white army fighters) contend that it played a negligible role in the fighting in eastern Upper Nile. Criteria for leadership positions in the white army include candidates being brave, consistent in their practice, and having the skills needed to resolve internal conflicts—which speaks to the fractious nature of the youths constituting the white army. There are no terms of office, and just as leaders are selected through consensus, they can be removed at any time by the same means. Only clan leaders have any regular and direct contact with the SPLM-IO military leadership, but clan members must approve any decision to collaborate with the SPLM-IO in military actions. This apparently rarely happens, if the testimonies of the white army fighters are to be accepted. Indeed, almost all white army fighters have very negative views of the black army, even if some individual leaders are respected, thus once again emphasizing the weakness of claims by the SPLM-IO to represent the white army.

Each clan leader has his own story, but Okdur Chol Diet, the leader of the Eastern Jikany white army, gained his reputation and popularity because of his skills at rustling cattle from the Lou—skills that were seen as being transferable to his role in leading irregular armed forces in a campaign against the government and in alliance with the Lou. Born in Jigmeer, he was a member of

a respected family. Okdur was aided in his leadership role by Major General Garouth Gatkouth when the latter served as commissioner of Nasir, both during the war, when he was a leader of the SSDF, and after the signing of the CPA, when he was nominally a member of the SPLA. Controversially, Garouth cooperated with the local white army under Okdur to provide security in the absence of resources to support an effective local police force, according to Eastern Jikany elders.¹⁰ Village elders had considerable influence over the white army (under Garouth), and it proved effective at ensuring peace in the rural areas and controlling Lou cattle raiding. Its fighters did not interfere with the citizenry and generally abided by the rule of not carrying weapons in villages or towns, and when individuals breached this rule the traditional authorities punished them. The effectiveness of these arrangements caused concern in Juba that Garouth, a former senior SSDF officer, was creating his own private militia. But the white army was based in the community, and although Garouth cooperated with it, the clan elders and Okdur exercised real power over it.

While one educated white army fighter from the diaspora described Okdur as a ‘cowboy’ (a not-unrealistic description, given the stories that circulate about him), Nuer elders defended him and said that he and the white army provided better security than was the case before Garouth cooperated with it, or after Garouth was removed as commissioner.¹¹ Before his dismissal Garouth promoted Okdur, who had never served in the army, to the rank of brigadier general, and at the time of writing he was being given formal military training and was to be integrated into the SPLM-IO (black) army. His replacement is Paul Tang Kum Wong, who was Okdur’s deputy and is also known to be a brave fighter who was always at the front line with his comrades in battle, as well as being a good speaker. Meanwhile, Garouth’s replacement as commissioner, Dak Tap, alienated the local white army fighters, and predictably the level of crime soared and the community resented his presence. The start of the civil war led to Dak’s overthrow, and Okdur appointed himself commissioner until arrangements could be made for an SPLM-IO appointee to take over.

In 2015 Duor Tut, a French-trained economist and former commissioner of Ulang, was appointed governor of Sobat (under Riek Machar’s system of 21 states based on the British colonial system), and although a successor to Garouth, his ideas on the white army are not dissimilar. Thus Duor endeavoured to use

the white army to provide security rather than pose a threat to security.¹² But he reported that the white army was initially ill disciplined and caused disruptions in the community. As a result, he devoted about six months to organizing meetings with communities and white army groups throughout the state to calm the situation and educate the fighters on the need to respect community values and the law. His objective, which he thinks had been accomplished by June 2015, was to bring the white army under control through the chiefs. He then linked the various components of the white army to the local, understaffed, and poorly resourced police force, and as a result the white army has become in his view ‘a positive force for security’. Moreover, Duor said that as a result of sustained indoctrination most white army fighters now appreciate that seeking revenge and killing Dinka is a ‘dead end’, and that political issues such as the need for schools, clinics, and jobs are increasingly coming to the fore.¹³

The experience in Sobat state suggests that irrespective of the crimes committed by some members of the white army in battles for control of government-held towns, the white army can be, if not fully controlled, at least directed and become an important element in community security. Operating along the same lines are the ideas put forward by the ‘White Army Foundation’, a largely diaspora-based group of white army fighters. Its supporters are trying to popularize notions of community security that bear a distinct resemblance to the experience in Nasir.¹⁴ The foundation proposes the adoption of programmes that were implemented in other countries, including in Ethiopia by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, in which local communities initially retained their weapons, but with the clear understanding that they would only be used for purposes of self-defence and would eventually be dispensed with entirely.¹⁵ Whether these ideas or the experience in Sobat can serve as a model for other areas or reflects unique conditions in the state and under Duor’s astute leadership is not clear. However, given the dearth of ideas on the future security of South Sudan and the disastrous experience of trying to suppress the white army through disarmament campaigns, these ideas need to be explored. The proposals on community security, however, are only an element—albeit a key one—in a larger effort to give the youths a voice in their future and overcome their political marginalization.

Okdur's counterpart among the Lou white army was Borduang Lih from Pathi Payom in Uror county, who comes from an esteemed family. The stimulus for him to fight appears to be the SPLA's killing of his father in 1991, after which he joined the white army and participated in the attack on Bor in the same year. He was also part of the white army that opposed the SPLA disarmament campaign of 2006 described above. But he achieved prominence in the Lou war against the Murle and particularly during the Murle attack in Perri in 2010 in which hundreds were killed, after which he became the acknowledged clan leader of the white army. Always in the front lines during battles, he is also described as a powerful speaker and ascribes to the Rastafarian faith. His leadership continued with the outbreak of the civil war in December 2013 and he led forces into Bor to rescue Lou at risk in the Jonglei capital; also, until the mission was aborted, he was a leader of the force that hoped to capture Juba.

Like Okdur, at the time of writing Borduang is being trained and integrated into the regular SPLM-IO forces, according to some as a reward for his contribution to the armed struggle, but a Lou elder from Walgak insisted that because he was now in his mid-forties he could no longer physically keep up with 18-year-old fighters and had effectively been retired.¹⁶ Not so the Gawar clan leader, Gatur Maboir, who is a younger man, but is also being integrated into the regular forces. On completion of their military training, Okdur and Borduang will be appointed to the regular forces as brigadier generals. White army fighters view these clan leaders as their representatives in the SPLM-IO military force and expect them to advance their interests. However, that is problematic, because there is little scope for military officers to represent the interests of their communities, and the interests of the white army fighters are not easily determined. More educated white army fighters felt that the integration of clan leaders into the SPLM-IO regular forces was designed to buy them off and reduce the threat they posed because of their influence over the fighters, which appears to be a more realistic explanation.

Lou elders report that prior to the civil war the white army behaved in similar fashion as their Eastern Jikany counterparts, namely that they often used their power and weapons to disrupt their communities. Goi Jok Yol, the commissioner for Akobo between May 2009 and March 2013, said that no commissioner in eastern Upper Nile could hope to provide security for his

community without the cooperation of the white army.¹⁷ He was replaced by Koang Rambunk Chol, who shared this philosophy, and similarly to what occurred in Nasir town and Sobat state, Lou SPLM-IO leaders have found it expedient to try and integrate the white army into the local security apparatus.

The community accepted the right of the youths to select their own leaders, but until the Lou were united around the struggle against the Murle and even more so against the government, the elders had little control over them. These popular struggles, however, led to an increasing role for the entire community, and from that time the behaviour of the youth improved. In principle, the traditional and white army structures are separate, but when the white army is not activated for war its members fall under the traditional structure. While elders as a separate group do not have any say in the strictly military concerns of the white army, they are able to advise the youth on how to behave when attacking government positions and to respect the rights of civilians. But it appears that the division between elders and white army fighters is not formal and is simply based on the fact that elders are usually older than fighters and not able to physically keep up with them. Chief Chol Gatbel reported that he participated in all the major white army campaigns in Upper Nile because despite his age he could run quickly.¹⁸

A Lou elder who worked closely with the white army said that, with greater community oversight of the fighters and better education, he was convinced that even if peace is achieved they will not go back to raiding Eastern Jikany cattle,¹⁹ but this is far from a universal view among the white army fighters interviewed. In any case, white army fighters and elders insist that the war is not over and will not end until Salva Kiir, as the instigator of the Juba massacre, is dismissed. Two of the more educated Lou fighters interviewed complained that the international community had conspired to keep Salva in office. Among the educated Lou fighters there is anger with the government's proposal for a 28-state federal system and fear that it alone could take the country back to war, but they acknowledge that many in the clan, and particularly youths, are not aware of the existence of this scheme. Some of the educated youths insist that Riek Machar opposes war, and because of his influence over the elders he was able to stop it before the SPLM-IO's objectives had been achieved. As a result they want to go back to war and 'finish the job', as one fighter put it.²⁰

White army fighters typically insist that Riek has no influence over their actions, particularly in the military sphere, but this is not completely true. First, Riek has influence over the chiefs and elders (who in turn exert influence over the white army, albeit in the circumstances described above), and part of this is due to his efforts to present himself to the Nuer as the fulfilment of prophecies by the tribe's most important prophet, Ngundeng Bong. It is thus widely believed among the Nuer that in the early twentieth century Ngundeng predicted that a left-handed descendant of Riek's grandfather would become an important leader of his people. Riek has attempted to present himself as this descendant, and shortly before the outbreak of the civil war he buttressed his claim by acquiring Ngundeng's *dang* (or stick) from Britain, where it had been taken.²¹ This link to the past and prophecy is influential among the traditionally minded chiefs and elders, but only one white army fighter referred to Ngundeng.²² A number of fighters, however, referred to the prophet Dak Kueth, who is a follower of Ngundeng and is married to one of his grand-daughters.

Second, Riek gained considerable credibility among the Nuer by challenging SPLM leader John Garang, who was held to be the embodiment of Dinka power and an oppressor of the Nuer, notwithstanding the widespread condemnation Riek received for the 1991 attack on the Bor Dinka. However, while the Bor attack has had an enormous influence on South Sudanese political developments, only a small number of the present crop of white army fighters either participated in that campaign or were old enough at the time for it to have any impact on their views.

Third, some of the leaders of the white army attended the large SPLM-IO party conference in Pagak, Upper Nile, in late November and December 2014 and, like other groups, had their own separate meetings (Young, 2015). However, unlike them, the white army's proceedings were not reported back to the general plenum, nor have white army leaders directly participated in the other Pagak meetings or leadership councils.

Fourth, Riek has maintained direct contact with elders and others in the field who in turn exert influence in the white army. Thus, in the midst of a battle it is not unusual for Riek to phone not the commanding officer of the attack, but a chief to gain his assessment of the action.²³ In Sobat, however, Governor Duor

Tut has confiscated all satellite phones out of fear that they could be used to pass on information to the government.

Fifth, Riek personally appoints all the SPLM-IO military leaders and they in turn meet with and no doubt influence the clan leaders of the white army, sometimes provide them with support, and on occasion coordinate the operations of the regular and irregular forces.

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, during the present civil war when the Nuer—quite correctly—viewed their tribe to be under siege and to have very few friends either in South Sudan or internationally, challenging Riek’s authority was considered tantamount to being a traitor and undermining the tribe. This was most convincingly indicated by his political victory over the dissenting generals in mid-2015. Although these generals were widely respected by the Nuer and largely sided with them on contentious issues (such as the devotion to the war, ending ties to the SPLM, giving the military a greater voice in the SPLM-IO, etc.), once they defected they were widely condemned in the SPLM-IO, even though it could be argued that Riek precipitated the problem by not bending to the popular will on these issues (Young, 2015). 📌

V. Changes in the white army

As noted above, the white army was established in 1991 for the specific purpose of conducting what probably most of the fighters thought involved enrichment by looting and revenge for various crimes attributed to John Garang. Twenty-five years later both continuity and change characterize the white army. The continuity lies in the fact that the primary objective of the white army remains the defence of community assets, which in practice largely means cattle. However, the spread of modern weapons to the youth served to make the white army an unaccountable power in their communities and thus weakened the traditional authorities, a process that in any case had been pursued by SPLA leaders, who viewed the chiefs as both backward and a threat to their desire for complete power in South Sudan. But the increasing difficulty of acquiring weapons in recent years and the outbreak of civil war in December 2013 served to unite the Nuer and reinforce the power of the traditional authorities and the SPLM-IO's local administration. Moreover, to a degree not evident before the war, the elders claim that they are able to exert more control over the fighters and influence them before they go into battle to maintain good behaviour, even if evidence suggests that such advice is not always followed.

Corresponding to this development, and in support of it, has been the growing number of educated youth in the white army. This can be attributed to a number of factors: first, there had been a dramatic increase in the provision of educational facilities in Ethiopia, which many Eastern Nuer have attended; second, the brief interim at the end of the second Sudan civil war produced opportunities for education that had not previously existed; third, many educated Nuer fled the major towns of Bor, Malakal, and Nasir after they were captured by the government and some joined the white army; and, lastly, since the onset of the December 2013 war the white army has been supplemented by Nuer who have gained an education in the diaspora. Acquiring education also meant that Nuer youth have moved to different parts of their state, country, or even beyond, which has widened their otherwise-parochial horizons

and may encourage more critical thought. The extent of this increase in educational attainments by white army fighters cannot be accurately estimated, and it can only be surmised that more education would lead the fighters to be more receptive to political objectives, more amenable to discipline, and less interested in a war based on revenge and looting.

It would seem that the average age of white army fighters has increased from the young boys who made up most of the force in its early years to the present, where it is not uncommon to find fighters in their thirties and even forties. It should be noted, however, that the term 'youths' as used by Nilotics can refer to those as young as ten and as old as 45. While human rights organizations have found under-aged boys in the white army,²⁴ the overall—and admittedly anecdotal—picture that emerges from this research is of a white army that is on average older and more educated than in the past. Fighters reported that few boys below the age of 15 were permitted to join the white army because they could not keep up with the rapid pace required, which often involves sub-clans competing in how quickly they can reach their destination. As one fighter put it, 'The most important thing for a white army fighter is to be able to run fast'.²⁵

Young women have not been admitted to the white army²⁶ and the primary reason given by fighters and women is that it is not part of Nuer tradition for women to fight, and in addition they refer to women's lack of military training and inability to run quickly. But these latter reasons appear bogus, and in socially conservative Eritrea and Ethiopia women formed a substantial proportion of fighters in the war against the Derg. Moreover, there are women in the regular forces of both the SPLA and SPLM-IO, as well as the police, wildlife forces, and prison guards. In addition, the chair of the SPLM-IO defence and security committee—in effect the minister of defence—is a woman, Angelina Teny, and she had no prior military experience.

Internationally and among its many enemies in Juba the white army is seen as made up of violent and uncontrollable youth, and while eight or ten years ago there were a considerable number of Nuer civilians who shared that view, this no longer appears to be the case. This is not to discount the well-documented reports of white army abuses of civilians in government-occupied towns, but, as noted, there is no longer evidence of systematic bad behaviour

by fighters in Nuerland, as was the case a few years ago. While killing Dinka for revenge continues to have considerable resonance with the fighters, this was not emphasized in interviews conducted in January and February 2016 as it was a year previously when the author interviewed white army fighters. While younger and less educated white army fighters interviewed were not usually critical of the SPLM-IO leadership and Riek Machar, this is not the case with the older and more experienced or educated fighters, who typically express anger at a leadership that signed a peace agreement that does not address the issue for which they fought—the killing of Nuer civilians in Juba—and retains in power a president they hold responsible for those killings. (To be fair, Riek and his representative in the negotiations, Taban Deng, repeatedly attempted to bring the issue of the Juba killings to the peace table, but the IGAD mediators sided with the government in not addressing the issue.) Most of these fighters—and one must assume they are opinion leaders in the white army—say that they are biding their time and expect to soon resume military activities. As one senior white army fighter from Jigmeer said, ‘We believed in Riek Machar and the SPLM-IO, but now understand that our interests have been ignored’.²⁷ He also said that the white army had learned from its mistakes such as leaving the towns it had captured and not having a clear idea of what it was fighting for, but claimed that the next round of fighting—which he held to be inevitable—would see major changes. 🗨️

VI. Crimes against civilians

Not surprisingly, questions about crimes against civilians during the attacks on Bor, Malakal, and other government-controlled centres are not a popular topic among white army fighters interviewed in the course of this study. Their response generally is twofold, if contradictory: first, the fighters refuse to acknowledge any crimes and, secondly, they maintain that the abuse of Dinka civilians is justified because Dinka tribesmen were guilty of killing Nuer in the Juba massacre; that is, that abuse of Dinka civilians is justified because of the need for revenge. In the case of Malakal, some fighters argued that those who were enemies of the government fled to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) Protection of Civilians (PoC) camp and those who remained in the town were government allies and thus could justifiably be attacked. Others said that they assisted the camp's Nuer residents to leave, and women and children residing in the town to enter it. It was freely volunteered that all men found in the captured town were shot under the assumption that they either were, or were likely to be, government soldiers who in the face of imminent defeat shed their uniforms and donned civilian clothes. The fact that old men were also routinely killed suggests that revenge rather than this logic was the primary concern. Revenge and not strict ethnic identification was paramount when Nuer who remained in state governments after the Juba killings or in the SPLA were considered to be Dinka and also killed.

White army fighters from the various clans all reported that elders and prophets like Dak Kueth had warned them not to burn down *tukuls* or abuse women during attacks. Among the Eastern Jikany, some elders followed the fighters and after a government town had been captured they urged that the youths be sent to outlying areas to establish defensive perimeters and thus limit their exposure to civilians. They also lectured fighters in the towns on the correct behaviour towards civilians. Some elders told the fighters that if they raped women they would be cursed or die in battle, and although—as the interviewed fighters tacitly admitted—rapes had been committed, the perpetrators

had been punished by their deaths in the same battle. All those interviewed denied that any children had been killed. Eastern Jikany fighters reported that they were warned that if they looted mattresses it would be dangerous to sleep on them, and thus they had to be given away.²⁸ Although difficult to interpret, one insight gained from this instruction is that the looting of enemy property is accepted in principle, but certain rules must be obeyed. All those interviewed said that no white army fighters had ever been punished for abusing civilians, but one chief reported that he and other elders publicly admonished guilty youth, and this served to tarnish these young men's reputation and that of their families.²⁹ Meanwhile, Nuer elders universally bewailed the collapse of the traditional rules of war, which they contended had previously assured the protection of civilians, women, and children.

The collapse of the traditional rules of war also applies to other armed groups in South Sudan, the most significant of which is the SPLA, whose record of brutality is long. Just as the white army set out to punish all Dinka for the actions of a handful in Juba, so the SPLA routinely practices collective punishment, goes into the field without food, and thus robs local communities of their food stocks, sometimes leaving them to starve. Likewise, random artillery attacks on villages believed to be supporting rebels, which make cultivation difficult or impossible, are common. In addition, burning down villages, the systematic rape of women, and a policy of not taking prisoners are also standard SPLA practice. 📌

VII. The white army in battle

There would be no significant SPLM-IO military victories without the white army, but the limited adaptation of the white armies to modern warfare and their lack of long-term objectives also go far to explain the few lasting military achievements of the armed opposition by the war's end (that is, the presumed end of the war with Salva Kiir's signature to the ARCSS). Although white army fighters are typically disdainful of the regular army, in Upper Nile regular SPLM-IO forces largely came under the command of Major General Garouth Gatkouth when the war started, but because he was unable to exert complete control over the troops and was unable to feed them, most melted back into their communities and then—with Garouth's encouragement—joined the white army. While their military experience was recognized, they were compelled to accept the culture of the white army, including its largely horizontal command structure.

In northern Upper Nile the white army worked more closely with the regular SPLM-IO forces. The Eastern Jikany white army alone captured Manthiang, Jamam, Tangrail, and Maban on its way north to receive weapons and supplies from the black army based along the border of White Nile state in Sudan. The white army then cooperated with regular forces in the capture of Melut, the crucial entry point to the oil fields of Polaich, after which the advance stalled for reasons that are not clear. Meanwhile, a special white army brigade of 1,500 fighters that took the name *silky* (which is Arabic for a finely meshed net that can catch an entire school of fish) was integrated into the regular forces of Johnson Olony's special division made up of both Shilluk and Nuer.

In Jonglei the white army forces also operated more closely with the regular SPLM-IO army than was the case in the Nasir–Malakal area. There, Major General Peter Gadet rebelled against the SPLA, and in alliance with the white army—but maintaining the separation of the two forces—captured Bor on 18 December 2013. Together they then began to march on Juba. This attack was aborted after Riek ordered Gadet to stop the advance, an order that white

army fighters interviewed during the course of this study considered to be a major mistake. But faced with making the attack on Juba alone and with increased defences provided by recently arrived Ugandan army units, the white army also ended its advance and returned to Bor. Meanwhile, Gadet was reassigned to his home area of Unity state and replaced by Major General Simon Gatwich, a son of the area; Gatwich was subsequently appointed chief of defence staff of the regular SPLM-IO forces.

The planning for white army attacks begins at the clan level and may involve meetings between the clan leader and senior commanders of the SPLM-IO black army, and then proceeds down through the various sub-clan units. Because decision making is based on consensus, the opposition of a single sub-clan to a proposed military action can lead to it being aborted. The elders will not participate in the actual battle planning, but will endorse the campaign and warn the fighters to behave and not attack women and children, burn buildings, or dishonour their communities. Nuer prophets are sometimes involved at this stage, particularly Dak Kueth, who warned the fighters about a number of moral issues, gave specific instructions apparently unrelated to the actual attack, and appears to have had some input in terms of the organization of the attack.

Those clan sections that performed poorly or showed cowardice in the previous battle are humiliated by being assigned positions in the rear during the next battle. Fear of disgrace is also a factor in encouraging the youth to join the white army and fight the war. Family and peers—and, most often, girls—would sneer at or humiliate any young man who refused to join the white army.

Crucial to the white army's organization is arranging for the food and other supplies necessary to conduct the campaign. Petty traders have also been involved in these efforts, both to help gather the food and also to personally contribute supplies. In areas close to Ethiopia, money is sometimes collected from community members or even in the market and taken across the border to purchase the required goods. Often the target to be attacked is a considerable distance away, as was the case when Nasir white army fighters had to walk for four days to attack Malakal, and in such cases the fighters prefer a diet of sorghum and maize and not meat, which they say slows them down. No women or support staff accompany the white army on these marches, but they may follow.

While Peter Gadet is famous for his ability to mobilize and raise the spirit of his regular soldiers before going into battle by urging them not to fear death, the white army fighters insisted that they did not have any fears before going into battle and did not need such morale boosting. Indeed, one fighter said, 'The black army needs such lectures because they are not brave, but we [in the white army] do not fear death and don't need [such lectures]'.³⁰ The fighters also insisted that if they died in battle, neither their families nor friends would mourn for them. While the latter claim may be false, the fighter's statement quoted above speaks to the macho culture and fatalism of the white army youths, as well as their disdain for the black army. One outside observer reinforced this perception and claimed that white army fighters did appear fearless in battle, no emotions were displayed in the face of the deaths of comrades, and fighters' deaths were simply announced to their families by a couple of gunshots outside their homes.³¹

Perhaps because of the emphasis on bravery or because alcohol and drugs have not undermined the Nuer youth as they have in other parts of Africa, or because of the still significant influence of the elders, there is little evidence of fighters using stimulants before going into battle. However, once a town is captured, drinking is common, presumably as a means to deal with the psychological stress the fighters have been under.

White army attacks only take place in daylight, because the fighters view it as deceitful to attack under cover of night. Likewise, they do not carry out ambushes or conduct guerrilla operations, apparently because they have not been trained to do so, although one officer said that this was a major weakness of the white army. When going into battle the fighters wear short trousers, are shirtless, and wrap a single coloured piece of cloth around their foreheads for identification purposes.

Lack of small arms and light weapons is a major problem for the white army, and in the initial battles an attacking force might only have had half a dozen modern weapons for a troop of one hundred fighters and only a few bullets for each of these weapons, while the large majority only possessed spears and knives. Black army artillery support was rare throughout the war, and white army fighters only infrequently possessed anything other than small arms like AK-pattern rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. Indeed, a major

incentive of the attacks was to acquire modern weapons. Unlike a regular force, individual fighters in the white army have the right to keep any weapon they acquire. Such weapons provide both security and a livelihood, and this is an incentive to join the white army. Under these circumstances the initial attacks against conventional and well-armed forces were almost suicidal, as the fighters acknowledged. Even after its fighters were better equipped, the white army was no match in terms of military hardware for the government army, which was assisted by Ugandan forces with air support.

An attack begins with the white army trying to get as close to its target as possible without being detected so that it is not subject to an artillery barrage, and then launching a massive and rapid charge. As a result, the white army's greatest assets are surprise and terrifying the enemy by the sheer size and commitment of the attacking force. Given the lack of modern weapons and ammunition, fighters do not start firing until they are within a range of about 30 metres and only after their section head has fired first. If the enemy soldiers in their trenches are overcome—and the white army fighters freely acknowledge that they never take prisoners—the garrison is likely to quickly fall. Indeed, the fighting is usually over in less than an hour. With their small arms, white army fighters have little hope of knocking out tanks and instead simply try to eliminate the machine gunner in the turret and avoid them.

Just as rapidly as the battle begins, it can end either in victory, with defending forces unable to withstand the attack if the white army is able to launch it from positions close to those of the government; or, if the government forces are able to withstand the attack, the white army fighters will retreat as rapidly as they had advanced, apparently to distance themselves as quickly as possible from small arms fire. According to General Garouth Gatkouth, who has had considerable experience with the white army, 'The white army retreats can be even faster than the advances, and out of control'.³² Talk of retreat, however, is a sensitive subject among white army fighters, since it is held to reflect badly on them, their families, sub-clan, and clan; and, indeed, some deny that the white army has ever fled from battle. While the white army repeatedly overcame the resistance of government forces in Bor and Malakal, they were unable to capture Nasir and Iyod despite repeated attempts, apparently because of the superior defences, which included deep trenches and razor wire.

If the white army captures a town its fighters will quickly turn to looting, and in the circumstances organization and discipline may completely break down and no one has any real control over them. One group of fighters jokingly complained that fighters stationed in the rear were best positioned for looting. In victory or defeat there will be an informal assessment of the performance of the various components in the attack and poor performance will reflect badly on the individuals involved and their communities, and lead to that component being reassigned in a future battle. A white army victory will inevitably bode ill for the local non-Nuer residents, who will be deemed government supporters. Nuer internally displaced persons in the UNMISS PoC sites in Greater Upper Nile may emerge from the camps and participate in the looting or the abuse of the resident civilians, who may in turn have previously abused them and forced them to take refuge in the PoC sites.

The capture of a town could mean taking possession of tanks, but white army fighters do not know how to operate them, and even if the attack involved SPLM-IO black army forces, they may also lack the necessary technical skills to do so, because Nuer in the SPLA were typically not trained to that extent. Claims of large-scale foreign support of the SPLM-IO's military campaign are belied by the fact that in practice its forces largely consist of the white army, whose fighters are notoriously badly equipped. The SPLA has been the white army's unwitting chief weapons supplier. Despite its fighters' irregular status, after capturing a town the white army will post the needed sentries and carry out perimeter patrols for fear of a government counter-attack.

After a brief period (usually two to four days) the white army fighters will typically want to return home and to their cattle herds, and, weighed down with loot, will leave the town to the control of the invariably small numbers of SPLM-IO black army troops. Realizing that resupplied government forces will likely return, some members of the black army may also loot the town and join the departing white army, thus leaving the remaining black army forces even more vulnerable to attack. Indeed, the experience has repeatedly been that the SPLA, often with the support of the Ugandan army, soon launches a counter-attack that the defending force cannot repel, and as a result it may follow the white army to secure positions in the countryside. The stage will then be set for another white army attack at a later date. The psychology of the

white army fighters, their lack of discipline, limited commitment to long-term and political objectives, and focus on the here and now go far to explaining how they could repeatedly overwhelm technically superior forces in entrenched positions, but then be unable to consolidate their victory, much less administer the towns they have captured, guarantee the security of the inhabitants, or reinstate public services. The recurring cycle of military victories followed by disasters has encouraged the SPLM-IO military leadership to train white army fighters and integrate them into the black army. There has been some progress in this regard, but when the war officially ended in August 2015 it had been very limited. 🇸🇩

VIII. The future

In the first year of the civil war the answer to questions as to what white army fighters wanted from the war was invariably to 'kill Dinkas'. More than two years after the start of the war, this question receives a more reasoned, although not always clear, response. Killing Dinkas has not gained the white army fighters much and they are becoming more critical of the war and particularly the peace process and peace agreement. Most said that their desire for revenge was not satiated and would not be until the Dinka of Bahr el Ghazal and Juba had suffered pain and Salva Kiir had stepped down. Hatred of the Dinka thus runs deep and is also reflected in the white army's demand that the 'Dinka SPLA' (in other words, the Dinka and SPLA are conflated) leave Nuer territory and that no Dinka should serve in local governments. Without knowing it, the fighters seemed to be articulating a notion of ethnic federalism, which in the wake of the war has become very topical. But it must be stressed that Nuer hatred of the Dinka is rooted in, first, historical competition for resources in a context of scarcity and, secondly, competition within and through Anyanya II, the SPLM, and SPLA for dominance of the armed groups and subsequently over power in the state. Key expressions of this animosity were the Nuer-led split of the SPLA in 1991; the Nuer attack on Bor in 1991; and, most recently, the killing of the Nuer in Juba in mid-December 2013. Hatred is not biologically driven, because there is considerable inter-marriage between the tribes and assimilation into the Nuer is highly flexible. Hatred is also not innate, but a product of particular conditions, an analysis of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

There is some awareness among the more articulate or educated white army fighters that although they and not the black army largely conducted the war and paid a heavy price, they have gained nothing from the peace. One educated fighter said he felt 'betrayed', while another said, 'We will give Riek two or three months, and if our demands that Salva be removed and that the SPLA leave our territory are not met, we will go back to war'.³³ These views are presently in the minority, but their adherents are leaders and opinion makers in the

white army. More common is a sullen sense that things have not gone as expected, rather than a clear view that the SPLM-IO leadership has used them to reach a peace agreement and now they are being ignored. The problem is compounded because the fighters usually claim that no one from the SPLM-IO leadership has ever spoken to them about the peace process or agreement—which is not entirely true, as noted above. A number of fighters noted that the senior members of the white army who have been integrated into the black army will represent their interests. If these interests are not advanced—so warned one fighter—the white army is well placed to undermine the government.

The people respected by white army fighters include Sobat governor Duor Tut, Akobo governor Kong Thour, and Adar governor Chayot Manyang, all of whom spend time in the field educating their people and informing them of developments, and have worked to integrate the white army into the local security apparatus. Interestingly, Johnson Olony, a Shilluk, is widely admired for his bravery and prowess, and indeed, although white army fighters are often very narrowly tribal in their thinking, their admiration for individuals known to be brave fighters is not bound by tribal considerations.

Nuer identity came to the fore in the context of white army anger at the Juba killings, and in response the Nuer engaged collectively in a tribal war of revenge against the Dinka. But these sentiments may be changing. A small number of respondents—all of whom were educated and experienced—spoke of a future war based on cross-ethnic collaboration, and one individual went so far as to say that if a particular individual had the right attributes, he would support a Dinka leader of the white army.³⁴ More commonly, however, a distinction can be made between the deep hatred white army fighters express for the Dinka and that for other tribes. Thus, despite vicious inter-tribal fighting between the Nuer and the Murle and the reported 28 Eastern Jikany civilians killed in a Murle raid on Makak village in Sobat during the course of this research, hatred for the Murle is not of the same order as that for the Dinka. This has historical origins and also reflects the deep trauma that the Nuer experienced collectively as a result of the December 2013 attack on their fellows in Juba.

When asked whether the fighters had received any political instruction from the SPLM-IO or had any political objectives as part of a broader campaign

against the government of Salva Kiir, most were unable to respond, although they were certainly clear in wanting Salva's removal and their view of the SPLA was entirely negative. Under the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)-led insurgency in Ethiopia, all fighters had to undergo political instruction, and even the youngest and most simple minded had some idea of the party programme (Young, 1997). But with a few notable exceptions, the members of the SPLM-IO leadership felt no desire to even convey their movement's political objectives to those whom they hoped would help realize them and over whom they claimed to have control.

The future for these young men is thus distinctly hazy. A few spoke of their desire to go or return to school, while others hoped to obtain positions in the regular army—a not unreasonable goal, given the limited job opportunities available to them in South Sudan. But it is not an optimistic scenario if South Sudan, and particularly the Nuer, are to escape their culture of militarism. Moreover, under a regime of low oil prices and the vast expenditures that will be needed to rehabilitate the war-damaged country, South Sudan can economically ill afford to maintain a large army or, politically, another Nuer-dominated army. Other youths interviewed had no desire to join the army, mostly because they did not want to accept military discipline and risk being sent to parts of the country far from their homes. Two senior Lou white army fighters said that as long as Salva was president the war could not end, and only with his departure—which they thought would require a return to war—could they anticipate joining the regular army.³⁵ Indeed, almost all white army fighters interviewed in the course of this research contended that the war was not over, since Salva still ruled and the SPLA occupied areas of their homeland, and as a result fighting could resume at any time.

The fighters were vague about what another war would look like, although they made it clear that they and no one else would decide if and when they would fight, and they would determine their objectives, although those who had thought most about the issue usually said that in another war they would capture and hold towns, including Juba. Only one person, a leader and chief, spoke about a white army government, and when the author expressed doubts as to the likelihood of this claim, he exclaimed, 'If we can control 40,000 crazy youth, we can run a government!'³⁶ 🗨️

IX. Conclusion

Although IGAD accepted the assurances that the white army of eastern Upper Nile was under the control of the SPLM-IO and could be represented in the peace negotiations by Riek Machar, this study has emphasized the white army's high degree of autonomy and self-mobilization, and the inability of any outside forces to exert effective control over it. The white army is a product of the community, and its actions in defending the community and attacking government installations and towns broadly represent the interests of the community and not the political interests of the SPLM-IO. Even white army fighters' abuse of civilians in the war—be they Dinka or those designated as Dinka because they support the government—does not fundamentally challenge the norms of a community whose existence was viewed as being threatened by a Dinka government. As a result, while the objectives of the white army beyond revenge for the killing of their fellow Nuer in Juba in mid-December 2013 are not always evident, it is clear that the white army insurgency has deep roots in the community, and its war was a popular one largely conducted independently of any external forces.

In the wake of the December 2013 massacres, Nuer males in large parts of South Sudan joined forces under the banner of the white army to exact revenge against what was seen as a Dinka-led SPLA attack on all people of Nuer ethnicity. Despite the lack of conventional military structure or order, the white army emerged as the main opposition to the SPLA. But the reasons why white army fighters took up this struggle have been neither adequately appreciated nor taken up in the IGAD peace process, which has been solely concerned with addressing the interests of elites from three SPLM factions. Although the SPLM-IO has multiple links to the white army, it does not control or even exert a significant influence over its decisions to fight the government, mobilize, fight particular battles, or decide on its own volition that the war is over by signing a peace agreement. The struggle of the white army was co-opted by the SPLM-IO to meet its own needs and agenda, and the latter was supported

by IGAD and the international backers of the peace process, because it also coincided with their own interests. But while, on the one hand, and for the purposes of the negotiations, the SPLM-IO leadership claimed to be in control of the white army of eastern Upper Nile, on the other hand, it attempted to distance itself from the abuses perpetrated by the fighters when they captured government towns. The result is a peace process and agreement that did not consider the views of the main opposition fighting force in the war, and this has dangerous implications for the future security of South Sudan.

One of the most striking findings of this research is the contrast between the ruthless and sometimes criminal behaviour of the white army fighters towards civilians during their attacks on government-held towns and their generally good behaviour in their own communities, to the extent that they are being used by local authorities to control crime. This appears to be due to the unity of the Nuer community in the insurgency against the government, and as a result the elders and local SPLM-IO leaders are able to positively influence the behaviour of the white army fighters in their communities, but not always in the fighting. This point was also made by Evans Pritchard (1940) when he described the socio-political organization of Nuer and Dinka ethnic groups as an acephalous state lacking legislative, judicial, and executive organs, but its persistence and coherent form meant that this was not a chaotic system, but one of 'ordered anarchy'.

This in turn suggests that the Nuer youth operate within a system of constraints and that they can also be politically educated. Of the hundreds of TPLF youth interviewed by the author during the course of the Ethiopian revolution, not one said that his/her objective was to kill Amhara, and all of them could articulate their party's basic programme, in stark contrast to the fighters in the Nuer white army. Although there are marked differences between the Nuer and Tigrayan cultures, there is no reason to assume that Nuer youth are any less intelligent or capable of absorbing political education and acting on political goals.

That the SPLM-IO leadership—following the pattern of the SPLM—has made no attempt to politically educate the fighters of the white army (and its followers generally) points to its political ineptitude, elitism, social conservatism, perhaps fear of a politically conscious youth, and desire to distance itself from white army fighters over whom they have little direct influence. Moreover, if the SPLM-IO

leadership is not interested in raising the political awareness of Nuer youths, there must be doubts as to the party's repeatedly stated commitment to transform South Sudan. Indeed, for a party that regularly trumpets its desire for reform, there is little indication of reforms in its own community, when it has been in a position to pursue such reforms for two-and-a-half years at the time of writing, and these reforms can be implemented without acquiring state power.

This issue also plays to a larger debate in the SPLM-IO between those who claim that the white army is a spent force whose energies have been dissipated in a dead-end pursuit of revenge and those who hold that the white army is prepared to go on fighting, because neither its objectives nor those of the SPLM-IO have been realized through the ARCSS. The missing link is politics, and if the white army has been exhausted in its pursuit of revenge (although this research suggests that this is not true), it is because the SPLM-IO leadership has done nothing to raise the consciousness of the youths beyond tribal hatred. It has accepted the self-fulfilling view that the youth are ignorant and incapable of being educated. Indeed, there appears to be a concerted policy in Sudan and South Sudan to use youth to fight the battles of the elites, but to ensure that they are kept in ignorance about the deeper significance of the conflicts in which they are involved.

The white army developed under conditions where governments in Khartoum and Juba, together with the SPLA, failed to provide security and, indeed, were often the major cause of insecurity, and also did not meet the most basic needs of their people. At every stage uneven development played a role in creating the objective conditions for the political response that resulted from this situation. Disenchantment deepened and in a Nuer culture where traditional martial values still resonated with the youth, it found expression in armed revolt when the community as a whole concluded that its existence was threatened after the government-orchestrated attacks on Nuer civilians in Juba. This remains the case even after the signing of the peace agreement, and it is notable that there is no talk of civilian disarmament, because it is recognized to be unrealistic in the circumstances.

The fact that the white army has not fought in recent months has less to do with the signing of the ARCSS than with the fact that the SPLA has not attacked Nuer civilians, disrupted their communities, or stolen their cattle. Another factor,

although not mentioned in any of the interviews, was the increasing ability of the SPLA to withstand white army charges by developing better defences, such as the increased use of razor-wire fences, trenches, and small armoured cars.

An experienced fighter said that the white army had stood down to give the international community an opportunity to bring peace to South Sudan, but made clear that its patience had limits. A common refrain of white army fighters is that the outcome of the war has not been decided and there is a need to either defeat the Dinka or be defeated by them. The peace between the white army and the SPLA is thus highly unstable, and precipitous action by the government could quickly produce a violent response. In the wake of the civil war in which the white army paid an enormous price, its sentiments cannot be discounted and no peace agreement can be sustainable without its support, or at least acquiescence.

From the time of the Juba killings the SPLM-IO leadership has linked its fate to the white army, and held that, on the basis of tribal allegiance and the absence of any independent political demands by the white army, it has the right to speak on behalf of these fighters. While the revenge-seeking focus of the white army has limited the capacity of the fighters to make specifically political demands, the insistence that Salva Kiir be removed from office and the corollary demands for ending relations with the SPLM and the removal of the SPLA from Nuerland are all of a political character and, moreover, have broad community support. If the government establishes a federal system of 28 states it will cause great anguish in Nuerland and lead to the oil-rich areas—which the Nuer are convinced belong to them—passing to Dinka state administrations. These are all explosive issues capable of taking the country back to war.

But it is noteworthy that to the extent that the white army has pursued political objectives, they are all of a negative nature, and there is no indication that it possesses any positive objectives. The claim by the chief and fighter quoted above that the white army on its own could form a government in Juba must thus be rejected. Not only does the white army not have the skills, experience, and vision to form a functioning government, but its ideas are deeply conservative, as was made clear by the inability of most of its members to rise above a focus on revenge and the firm rejection of women in its ranks. The historical experience of the few popularly based and led movements that have come to

power is one of quick collapse, and it is only when such movements are led by a radical intelligentsia, such as was the case in Ethiopia, that they have the potential of being successful and enduring (Young, 1997).

It must be stressed that the Nuer white army of today is not the same as when it first appeared on the historical stage in 1991. Note has been taken of the changing age and levels of education of the fighters, but in addition some fighters have been integrated into the regular SPLM-IO forces and a small number who have demonstrated their leadership capacities are being promoted to senior positions. Interviews with the fighters also brought to light their increasingly critical assessment of the war and the SPLM-IO political leadership, and it can be speculated that should they be involved in another war, their actions could be quite different. Among a minority of more educated, experienced, and worldly members of the white army there is a growing anger at their cooptation by the SPLM-IO leadership and marginalization by the international community in the peace process. This is leading to critical appraisals of the SPLM-IO leadership and the white army's performance during the war, and a search for means by which they could resume the war without the involvement of the SPLM-IO leadership. These fighters want leaders who will acknowledge their interests, are brave, and will provide them with the means to return to war. In addition, leaders would need the political vision that even the most far-sighted white army fighters presently lack. Such potential leaders are not on the immediate horizon, but if the crisis in South Sudan drags on—and there is every indication that it will—they could come from the white army diaspora or beyond.

Lastly, the marginalization of the Nuer white army in the peace process is indicative of a flawed model of peacemaking that focuses solely on the interests of elites, ignores the interests of the common people, and assumes that the conflict can be resolved by reaching agreement on a power-sharing formula. Moreover, just as the Naivasha peace process did not permit the SSDF to participate in the negotiations and caused major problems as a result when SSDF generals played a significant role in the revolt against the Juba government in December 2013, it can also be predicted that the failure of the Addis Ababa peace process to acknowledge the significance of the white army in the civil war or address its interests will also have negative implications. 📌

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Endnotes

- 1 In this paper, the singular form ('white army') refers to the collection of semi-autonomous forces ('white armies').
- 2 Author interview with Maj. Gen. Peter Gadet, Pagak, South Sudan, 9 December 2014.
- 3 Author interview with Lt. Gen. Tijok Hadar, SPLM-IO, Gambella, 1 February 2016.
- 4 Author interview with Paulino Kor Manyel, white army commander, Gambella, 26 January 2016.
- 5 Author interview with Paulino Kor Manyel, white army commander, Gambella, 26 January 2016.
- 6 Author interview with white army fighter, Gambella, 29 January 2016.
- 7 Author interview with white army fighter, Gambella, 30 January 2016.
- 8 Author interview with white army fighter, Gambella, 30 January 2016.
- 9 Author interview with Duor Tut, governor of Sobat state, Gambella, 8 February 2016.
- 10 Elements of the following explanation can be found in Young (2007b) and have also been confirmed by various interviews, but most helpfully by three Eastern Jikany elders: Bishok Gony Nyoun, John Gony Chol, and Yien Nyan, who were interviewed in Gambella on 27 January 2016.
- 11 Garouth's commissionership was eventually terminated because the Nasir white army under his authority attacked a convoy of UN boats on the Sobat River that were believed to be carrying weapons disguised as food to the Lou at a time when the two clans were fighting. Not only did the white army sink the boat suspected of carrying the weapons, but also overwhelmed and killed the SPLA guards. After his dismissal from his commissionership Garouth was appointed as an adviser to the Upper Nile government, and in the wake of the Juba killings was one of the first local leaders to mobilize his clan's members and lead them in a number of attacks, until Riek appointed him to the high command. Riek dismissed him from this position in June 2015 after he publicly criticized Riek at a church in Gambella, after which he decamped to Khartoum along with Maj. Gen. Peter Gadet and a number of other former SSDF senior officers. He subsequently rejoined the government.
- 12 Author interview with Duor Tut, governor of Sobat state, Gambella, 29 January 2016.
- 13 Author interview with Duor Tut, governor of Sobat state, Gambella, 29 January 2016.
- 14 Author interview with Banydeet Kawai Juomjieklim, a director of the White Army Foundation and senior white army fighter, Gambella, 26 January 2016.
- 15 Author interview with Lt. Gen. Tsadkan Gebre Tsai, former chief of staff, Ethiopian army, Addis Ababa, 14 July 2006.
- 16 Author interview with Gordon Nyot, Lou Nuer elder, Gambella, 31 January 2016.
- 17 Author interview with Goi Jok Yol, Addis Ababa, 22 January 2016.
- 18 Author interview with Chief Chol Gatbel, Cie Lang sub-section Eastern Jikany, Gambella, 12 February 2016.
- 19 Author interview with Gordon Nyot, Lou Nuer elder, Gambella, 31 January 2016.

- 20 Author interview with white army fighter, Gambella, 5 February 2016.
- 21 Ngundeng Bong's *dang* was returned to Juba in May 2009 by Professor Douglas Johnson, who handed it over to Riek Machar, after the colonial authorities had taken it to Britain 80 years previously.
- 22 Author interview with Samuel Quot, senior white army Lou fighter and community leader from Opel, Upper Nile, Gambella, 10 February 2016. Samuel attributed the large number of times that the towns of Greater Upper Nile went from government control to that of the Nuer forces and back again to prophecies made by Ngundeng.
- 23 Author interview with Bol Gatkouth, Addis Ababa, 14 April 2015. Bol reported that during a white army attack on Nasir in August 2014 a chief near him received a call from Riek asking about the operation, and when he heard that Bol was participating in the attack, asked to talk to him.
- 24 While the SPLM-IO has denied accusations of recruiting under-aged soldiers into its regular forces, it acknowledges that child soldiers have been recruited into the white army; see *Sudan Tribune* (2014). White army fighters routinely acknowledge the presence of 15-year-olds among their membership, but claim that those under 15 are denied membership because they are not strong enough.
- 25 Author interview with white army fighter, Gambella, 3 February 2016.
- 26 Despite persistent reports of isolated cases of women in the white army, the present investigation was not able to meet any such women and the large majority of those interviewed insisted that there were no women in the white army and thus the earlier assertion to that effect (see Young, 2015) must be rejected.
- 27 Author interview with Bor Chol, Gambella, 4 February 2016.
- 28 Author interview with a group of Eastern Jikany white army fighters, Gambella, 5 February 2016.
- 29 Author interview with Chief Chol Gatbel, Cie Lang sub-section Eastern Jikany, Gambella, 12 February 2016.
- 30 Author interview with Dobel Lual, senior SPLM-IO official, who witnessed a number of white army battles in eastern Upper Nile, Addis Ababa, 19 February 2016.
- 31 Author interview with an Eastern Jikany fighter, Gambella, 28 January 2016.
- 32 Author interview with Bol Gatkouth, Gambella, 8 February 2016, as related to him by Garouth before going into battle with the white army.
- 33 Author interview with Samuel Gai Manyan, senior Eastern Jikany commander, Gambella, 4 February 2016.
- 34 Author interview with Moses Chol, senior Eastern Jikany commander, Gambella, 9 February 2016.
- 35 Author interview with Samuel Gai Manyan and Paulino Kor Manyel, senior Lou commanders, Gambella, 4 February 2016.
- 36 Author interview with Chief Chol Gatbel, Cie Lang sub-section Eastern Jikany, Gambella, 12 February 2016.