

SITUATION UPDATE

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Port Sudan: The Political Economy of a Potential Administrative Capital

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KEY FINDINGS

- Following the outbreak of war between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, in April 2023, the Sudanese government has not officially relocated the capital to Port Sudan, despite some government departments, diplomatic agencies, and international organizations setting up administrative headquarters in the eastern port city.
- Belligerents on both sides of the conflict are trying to gain legitimacy through the formation of de facto governments in their areas of military control. This sets a dangerous precedent of using the logic of governance to shape the direction of the conflict, particularly the dynamics of aid.
- The intention of SAF to form a new government in Port Sudan has contributed to political fragmentation among an already fragile coalition weakened by the October 2021 coup.
- Unresolved issues related to political settlements are exacerbating political tensions in Port Sudan. The Juba Peace Agreement (JPA), championed by the military government, is not embraced by the High Council of Beja Nazirs and Independent Chieftains (referred to hereafter as Beja Nazirs Council) in the east. Land disputes and the future of Port Sudan's political economy remain contentious issues.
- A strategy of excessive securitization by SAF, including curfews, has been imposed to control all aspects of daily activities in Port Sudan.
- Restrictions on aid distribution, the government's decision to ban all community-based committees and initiatives, and weak state infrastructure continue to exacerbate humanitarian needs in the city.

Context

The outbreak of war in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, on 15 April 2023 caused—in addition to substantial human loss and the destruction of infrastructure—major disruption in state activity and civic services. Law enforcement forces quickly disappeared from the streets of Khartoum and were replaced by SAF and RSF soldiers, leaving civilians still in the city extremely vulnerable to wanton violence and crime. Since April 2023, civilian movement and access to emergency services in the capital remain exceedingly limited, with local social networks—including emergency response rooms emerging from resistance committees—helping people navigate through 'safe' zones and access basic supplies and medical care. The war has exposed the shortcomings of the centralization of Sudan's governance structure and public services. While some services have been re-established outside of the capital, such as the big cities in northern and eastern states including Port Sudan, capacity remains limited, hampered by rudimentary infrastructure that is now put under further pressure by the overwhelming displacement of people (SUNA, 2023c). Since April, an estimated 3,557,494 people have fled the Khartoum state, with millions more fleeing other areas (IOM, 2024b, p. 3).

In the wake of the unrelenting violence and chaos in Khartoum, some government ministries, aid organizations, and diplomatic agencies—particularly those involved in facilitating humanitarian relief—relocated to Port Sudan, the capital of Red Sea state. Untouched by the ongoing war and strategically located on the Red Sea, Port Sudan, with its operational port, is an appealing potential administrative capital for SAF. At present, the port serves as a hub and central distribution point for humanitarian aid. Its airports and seaport provide safe transit points for Sudanese civilians, government officials and diplomats, and foreigners. Several embassies have transferred their activities to the coastal city, including those involved in conflict-cessation negotiations, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the United Kingdom (Alayam News, 2023; Altabia, 2022; UK FCO, 2023).

Relative to Khartoum, Port Sudan is a small city with limited infrastructure. The influx of displaced civilians and others into Port Sudan, primarily from Khartoum, and from Madani after mid-December, has overwhelmed the city. Within months, pressure on public services, compounded by limited state government funds, resulted in power and water shortages.

Port Sudan is poised to become the designated seat of SAF in its effort to regain administrative control of Sudan. In late September 2023, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, speaking in the city, explained that it was necessary to move SAF's headquarters to Port Sudan owing to continued insecurity and fighting in Khartoum (Al-Mashhad Al-Sudani, 2023). Al-Burhan has been keen to hold meetings with SAF leadership, his cabinet, and others—including Minni Minnawi, the governor of Darfur. Prominent figures from native administrations have also settled in the city, including Masalit from West Darfur state. From his eastern headquarters, al-Burhan has made many trips abroad with the aim of gaining the political and diplomatic support that would enable him to confidently declare a de facto government in Port Sudan; however, none of these trips have been successful.

As SAF's efforts to re-establish a governance structure in Port Sudan continue, unease among local residents and political groups persists. In 2023, the city witnessed clashes between the army and forces affiliated with Shaybah Dirar's wing of the Beja Congress, a political organization comprised of several eastern groups with a long history of political resistance against centralized power in Khartoum, including the Bashir regime (Africanews, 2023).¹

A delayed but imperative new capital

Port Sudan, in Sudan's north-east, is geostrategically important due to its position on the Red Sea. It is the country's main seaport through which 90 per cent of Sudan's international trade transits (Eltahir, Abdelaziz, and Saul, 2021). Former Prime Minister

¹ For background on the Beja Congress and power in Khartoum, see Small Arms Survey (2015).

Abdalla Hamdoug's plans for Sudan's economic recovery had included developing Port Sudan as a regional logistics hub for neighbouring landlocked countries, including Ethiopia and South Sudan, prior to his removal in the October 2021 military coup. Before the current conflict, the Red Sea state was second only to Khartoum in terms of subnational resource revenues (Logan et al., 2021, p. 39).

Shortly after the government stated that it had no intention of making the city its new headquarters, it formed what appeared to be an emergency government in Port Sudan (Al Arabi, 2023). The Council of Ministers held its first meeting in Port Sudan on 9 July, headed by Osman Hussein, the minister of cabinet affairs and prime minister-designate (Noor News, 2023). The meeting was also attended by a member of the Sovereignty Council, Assistant Commander-in-Chief Lt. Gen. Ibrahim Jaber, signalling continuity with pre-war governance structures (Sudan Akhbar, 2023). These meetings resulted in decisions to prioritize salary payments to civil servants and increase cash flows by printing banknotes outside of Sudan (Halfawi, 2023). Banks in areas not affected by the war were called upon to resume financial activities and report problems to the Central Bank branch in Port Sudan (SUNA, 2023b). Parts of the executive apparatus were also replaced, both before and after al-Burhan's arrival in Port Sudan (Ahmed, 2023).

As part of these undeclared efforts to re-establish the seat of governance away from war-torn Khartoum, the Red Sea state government granted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs land in Port Sudan to build a permanent headquarters, a conference centre, and presidential villas (*Sudan Tribune*, 2023a). From Port Sudan, the government launched a campaign to emphasize its legitimacy by issuing several directives. For instance, in July, the Sudan Railways Company resumed the Atbara–Port Sudan line (SUNA, 2023a), and the Civil Aviation Authority reopened commercial air flights in coordination with the International Civil Aviation Organization (Abdulrahim, 2023). Badr and Tarco, both national carriers, and international carriers such as EgyptAir resumed flights (Kush News, 2023). Furthermore, the Ministry of Interior opened an electronic passport facility in Port Sudan, restoring this service following its earlier suspension in Khartoum. Meanwhile,

diplomatic activity is abuzz in Port Sudan as SAF seeks a political solution to the conflict through external interventions, underscoring the importance of having a functioning government in place.

Formally naming Port Sudan as the capital poses risks for al-Burhan since Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as 'Hemeti') could feel compelled to name an RSF-controlled capital elsewhere. Coexistent capitals could deepen the SAF–RSF political struggle and overrule legitimacy, which in turn would, among other things, likely complicate the management of humanitarian aid. Hemeti has threatened to form a parallel government in Khartoum, or perhaps in Geneina, West Darfur (Daglo, 2023; Reuters, 2023). Furthermore, if al-Burhan were to declare Port Sudan the capital, it could send a message to SAF officers in Khartoum that their commands will be abandoned, potentially destabilizing the already fragile SAF internal cohesion (Younes, 2024); the largest SAF forces are still located in Khartoum.

Displacement and dwindling services

As of February 2024, 249,555 internally displaced persons (IDPs) are seeking refuge in the Red Sea state, the majority of them in Port Sudan (IOM, 2024b, pp. 2, 25). These IDPs arrived mostly from Khartoum, and include Sudanese citizens and foreign nationals, among others. The option to leave the country through Port Sudan—by air or sea—coupled with the city's ability to issue passports, has contributed to the inflow of people.

In mid-December 2023, the war expanded into Al-Jazira state and led to a huge increase in IDPs in Port Sudan. More than half of them ended up with relatives in host communities, and just over 30 per cent sheltered in rented accommodations; others resided in schools and public buildings, or in temporary shelters erected in open spaces (IOM, 2024a, p. 25).

About 13 per cent of IDPs in Port Sudan are also refugees, including from Chad, Eritrea, Niger, South Sudan, and Syria (IOM, 2023, p. 25; Tashtankulov, 2023). Their displacement to Port Sudan poses a huge

challenge to the eastern state, which is devoid of refugee camps and humanitarian infrastructure. IDPs and refugees sheltering in newly set up centres suffer from overcrowding, lack of clean water, a shortage of food, and limited electricity and sanitation services. These challenges increase their vulnerability to communicable diseases (IOM, 2023, p. 25).

Formal housing costs spiked following the initial inflow of people fleeing Khartoum, but decreased as demand waned and the Sudanese diaspora, expats, and others left Sudan. Most IDPs in Port Sudan, however, lack the means to support themselves, adding pressure on the government and aid agencies to support them.

When the war spread into Al-Jazira state in mid-December, thousands more people fled to Port Sudan, engendering an increase in the prices of basic goods and housing. The cost of renting a small house (two rooms and a kitchen) in the peripheral neighbourhoods of the city reached SDG 750,000 (about USD 650) per month. As for furnished apartments, the monthly rent reached the equivalent of USD 2,000 for a large one, and about USD 1,500 for a one-room apartment.

This war has exposed how Sudan's centralized system of governance, combined with the rudimentary infrastructure upholding it, limits the distribution of aid—factors that further compound the current humanitarian crisis across Sudan. In Port Sudan, high temperatures just after the breakout of war intensified the impact of electricity and water shortages. Cash flow problems resulted in prolonged power outages in the city throughout May (Radio Dabanga, 2023b). Water shortages linked to limited power supply saw the price of a full jerry can of fuel reach SDG 3,000 (USD 3).²

The dire economic conditions in Port Sudan stem from the same national dynamics of inequality and underdevelopment that contributed to the eventual destruction of the centre of the country during this war. As the situation stands, social unrest may well materialize in Port Sudan, causing further disruption

of government services and compounding challenges for the delivery of humanitarian aid. The December Revolution's call for equal representation through democracy, in which the decentralization of services is a key component, continues to dominate public debate, and is considered even more urgent by pro-democratic groups in the face of the current crisis.

Legacy and fragmentation of the JPA's eastern track

The 2019 JPA, established to resolve Sudan's various armed conflicts in the west, south, and east of Sudan, remains contested. Members of the Beja Nazirs Council, eastern Sudan constituents, continue to be dissatisfied with the JPA and suspicious of the political interests of the Forces of Freedom and Change-Democratic Bloc (FFC-DB), which includes Gebreil Ibrahim, a JPA signatory (as leader of the Justice and Equality Movement) and current minister of finance.

The Beja Nazirs Council was established in 2020 as a counter-weight to the Sudan Revolutionary Front's (SRF's) monopoly of representation in eastern Sudan within the JPA framework. The group's opposition to Sudan's transitional government, led by then Prime Minister Hamdouk, culminated in numerous acts of popular mobilization, including the closure of crucial trade routes connecting Port Sudan to Khartoum (*Sudan Tribune*, 2021). Despite the complexity of the group's political position—siding with neither civilian politicians nor armed actors—the Beja Nazirs Council's resistance narrative was widely co-opted, by both themselves and the military as a reason for the fall of the 2019 transitional government through the October 2021 coup (Jamal, 2023). The subsequent political shifts caused further fragmentation within the already fragile JPA settlement. As a result, the Beja Nazirs Council split into two wings: one led by al-Nazir Tirik, a member of the FFC-DB that aligned with the JPA after the coup, and the other by al-Nazir Ibrahim Adroub. Adroub opposed the alliance of Tirik with the SRF, declaring it a betrayal of the process

2 Author interview with Hassan Alnaser, freelance journalist, Port Sudan, Sudan, 13 October 2023.

and outcomes of the 2020 Senkat Conference, which challenged the Khartoum-backed eastern track within the JPA (Mubark, 2022; *Sudan Tribune*, 2022c).

Disputes between both sides—former allies, now enemies—did not, however, preclude their mutual support of the army against the RSF after the war began. Eastern Sudan elites developed political animosity towards the RSF during Hemeti’s presidency of the Supreme Committee to Address the Eastern Sudan Crisis, perceiving him as the architect of the JPA and responsible for weakening the Beja Nazirs Council in central politics (Asharq News, 2021; *Sudan Tribune*, 2022a). This prompted the Red Sea state government to withdraw the allocation of land for RSF training camps (Democrat, 2022).

Even before the ongoing war, the Forces of Freedom and Change-Central Council (FFC-CC) had no land to till in the Red Sea. Instead, their rivals, the FFC-DB, achieved ascendance through marginalized regions such as the east. Tirik managed to create an alliance between the JPA signatories, within the transitional government, and the native administration in the east, which in turn gave the FFC-DB the popular legitimacy that the (pre-split) Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) had lost following its alliance with the sovereign military council in 2019.

Political economy of Port Sudan

Prior to the war, the political economy of the east shaped political developments in Sudan. In the months leading up to the outbreak of conflict, Gebreil stirred resentment in the east against Khartoum and the JPA when he signed a tripartite agreement between the Government of Sudan, the Sudanese private capital firm Invictus Investment, owned by Sudanese tycoon Osama Daoud, and the Emirati AD Ports Group—the latter two constituting a long-term Emirati alliance. The contract stipulated a USD six billion investment to the Sudanese government for the development of the new Abu

Amama port. The deal included a free industrial zone, commercial and residential cities, and resorts to promote tourism (Othman, 2022). The terms of the contract were shielded from the public, despite promises to the contrary. Port Sudan residents feared that the project would negatively affect the city’s economic prospects, which are dependent on the existing port. There were also concerns that the UAE would require concessions that would not be welcomed by civic associations and workers’ unions (*Sudan Tribune*, 2022b).

With these developments in mind, Adroub’s Beja Nazirs Council wing called for the dismissal of Gebreil as minister of finance, alleging corruption and mismanagement of Port Sudan (Obshar, 2022). In June 2023, the Joint High Committee in Red Sea State to Demand Workers’ Rights and the Teachers’ Committee held a protest at Gebreil’s Port Sudan residence to demand a solution to electricity outages and the payment of delayed salaries to workers and civil servants. Similarly, maritime workers denounced the Ministry of Finance’s failure to pay their dues, and declared a strike. The Sudanese Teachers’ Committee in the Red Sea also called for a strike, demanding backdated payment of salaries from April. The strikers have since entered into direct negotiations with the director general of finance in the state, who has committed to paying 50 per cent of the amount due while negotiations are still underway to settle the rest.³

At the end of November, workers in the Red Sea state ended their strike after the government promised to pay August and September salaries, and to make the necessary arrangements for the payment of October salaries. In early January, the Red Sea State Government’s Council of Ministers approved the budget for the year 2024, amounting to more than SDG 100 billion (about USD 168 million), with payrolls as a priority.⁴

The FFC-DB’s politicking in the east, however, represents a dangerous path in a state that has been plagued by ethnic violence dating back decades (Fadl, 2020). Tensions worsened after the popular revolution succeeded in overthrowing al-Bashir in

³ Author interview with Hassan Kunah, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association of Red Sea State, Port Sudan, Sudan, 16 July 2023.

⁴ Author interview with Hassan Kunah, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association of Red Sea State, Port Sudan, Sudan, 16 July 2023.

2019, exposing in the process cleavages in the failed settlement process with the Beja Nazirs Council. Despite expanded urbanization and the increased waves of immigration to the east, the inner city's neighbourhoods remain divided along ethnic and class lines—a product of 20th century colonial urban planning (Abdel Ati et al., 2011). The most recent violence occurred in August 2019 between the Beni Amer and the Nuba groups, and in November 2019 between the Beni Amer and the Hadendaowa (Al Arabiya, 2019; Alhurra.com, 2019). Further violence took place in August 2020 in neighbouring Kassala state (OCHA, 2020). Disputes over land ownership are a major driver of ethnic grievances, including the violation of compensation rights for any major development projects (such as the development of ports) (Abdel Ati et al., 2011, p. 15).

Lingering disputes within the Beja Nazirs Council may similarly be attributed to contestation over land in relation to development planning. The proposed building site for the Abu Amama port, whose construction is pushed by the Gebreil–Tirik alliance within the Beja Nazirs Council, falls within the oversight boundaries of the Bishari people (Radio Dabanga, 2023a). Meanwhile, the dissenting faction of the Beja Nazirs Council, the Amarar, are the historic claimants of Port Sudan's land. Despite conflicting political positions, the economic interests of eastern elites—particularly developments concerning the ports—remain the key area where all groups are prepared to compromise. Tirik, a staunch SAF ally, did not re-evaluate his administration's position on the port of Abu Amama, nor did he review the UAE's future investment in the region despite its backing of the RSF. Following the outbreak of war, political fragmentation continues to occur along personal and ideological lines, thus conforming to the post-colonial ideal in the context of Sudan.

Early in the war, SAF consolidated control over the Red Sea state through excessive securitization, such as appointing a military governor who prohibited any criticism of SAF, banned all community-based initiatives—including emergency response rooms—and formed alternative committees mandated by district directors; these committees do not include former members of resistance committees or the

FFC (Altaghyeer, 2023; Radio Dabanga, 2024a). The local government in Port Sudan imposed a curfew in May and again in December 2023, which is ongoing (*Sudan Tribune*, 2023b). In February 2024, despite a total outage of communications and internet networks for more than a week, the eastern government banned Starlink devices, which exacerbated the suffering of people who use banking apps in their daily transactions (Radio Dabanga, 2024b).

Securitization remains the most viable governance strategy in Port Sudan in the face of possible infiltration by the RSF and their alliances, as well as a means of quelling any fears arising from a possible fallout of further political fragmentation with the eastern peace bloc, as was the case in Khartoum. The first three months of the war saw continuous SAF allegations of raids on RSF sleeper cells, claiming to have arrested infiltrating enemies within the Red Sea state or aborted attempts to smuggle weapons across the Red Sea coasts into Port Sudan and Suakin (France 24, 2023; Othman, 2023). The Red Sea state later banned the building of shops in public facilities, and arrested young people from the regions of Darfur and Kordofan, most of whom have marginal daily jobs, such as wheelbarrow porters, over allegations of their affiliation with or support to the RSF.

The city, however, has not witnessed any security incidents since the arrival of al-Burhan, except for a small clash between SAF and its once-aligned eastern militia under the command of self-promoted Lt. Gen. Shaybah Dirar (Nashed, 2023b).

Politicization of humanitarian aid

Port Sudan receives tons of humanitarian aid through its airports and seaport, including from several countries involved in Sudan's pre- and post-war peacemaking efforts (China, Egypt, the European Union, India, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, and the United States).⁵ UN agencies and non-governmental

5 Author interview with Abdel Fattah Mohamed, War Emergency Rooms volunteer, Port Sudan, Sudan, 16 July 2023.

organizations (NGOs) have also provided aid. Access to aid has, however, been arbitrarily restricted by government actors, with accusations of theft, obstruction, and intimidation (Nashed, 2023a).

Port Sudan does not have sufficient humanitarian infrastructure and neither the government nor international organizations possess the means to adequately shelter or provide for the IDPs residing in the city. The provision of most of the humanitarian assistance in Port Sudan, including housing centres, was established by local volunteer groups, making use of student dormitories, tribal association centres, and cultural and sports clubs. Despite these critical community-led initiatives, volunteer groups and communities were excluded from the design and implementation of aid delivery operations.⁶

Since the outbreak of war, aid agencies and humanitarians have complained of bureaucratic and security restrictions limiting relief efforts: visas have been delayed and excessive inspections have slowed outbound deliveries (OCHA, 2023; Sudan INGO Forum, 2023). Meanwhile, informal community-based networks, including in Port Sudan, have been marginalized by the government and international agencies, and have experienced interference from both SAF and the RSF. Drawing on the support of local networks, including post-war emergency rooms and resistance committees, could extend the reach of humanitarian aid, strengthen transparency mechanisms, and increase public confidence. Furthermore, boosting local networks' involvement would strengthen their capacity to support communities after aid agencies and NGOs leave.

Implications for the international community

More than eight million people, most of them women and children, have been displaced within Sudan or forced into neighbouring states including the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, and South Sudan (OCHA, 2024). This number will likely rise as fighting continues.

The international community can put more pressure on the belligerents to stop the fighting and prevent it from expanding into areas where victims are displaced, including the Red Sea state. It can also push for the opening of safe corridors to deliver aid to millions of Sudanese stranded in conflict and displacement areas. A comprehensive peace process, incorporating aid, must, however, be seen within the broader political context, including the nature and history of the current conflict. The political fragmentation that resulted from the post-2019 transitional settlements, including but not limited to the JPA, is especially significant. The period saw belligerents pitted against Sudanese aspirations for a democratic civil transformation, for which thousands of pro-democracy youths died while calling for the return of the military to the barracks and the dissolution of the Janjaweed (Elmardi, 2023).

The brothers and sisters of those pro-democracy activists are now leading the network of community-based initiatives, in emergency response rooms and welcome shelter centres, and must be a key part of any aid plan. This means not only assisting these responders financially, but also putting them at the centre of the political and humanitarian debate, finding new, innovative, and braver ways to empower and form partnerships with them. ●

6 Author interview with Abdel Fattah Mohamed, War Emergency Rooms volunteer, Port Sudan, Sudan, 16 July 2023.

Abbreviations and acronyms

FFC	Forces of Freedom and Change
FFC-CC	Forces of Freedom and Change-Central Council
FFC-DB	Forces of Freedom and Change-Democratic Bloc
IDP	Internally displaced person
NGO	Non-governmental organization
JPA	Juba Peace Agreement
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SDG	Sudanese pound
SRF	Sudan Revolutionary Front
UAE	United Arab Emirates
USD	United States dollar

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

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