

SITUATION UPDATE

December 2025



Making the Enemy: The War in Western Equatoria and Western Bahr el Ghazal States

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KEY FINDINGS

- Government forces have provoked conflict in Western Equatoria and Western Bahr el Ghazal states.¹ Disorder has enabled President Salva Kiir's regime to inflict political defeats on its opponents in Juba, while fracturing opposition forces on the ground.
- In Western Equatoria, Kiir's regime has outsourced its counterinsurgency to an Azande militia. The Azande Ani Kpi Gbi (AAKG) includes fighters from the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It is engaged in a zero-sum conflict with Balanda forces led by Alfred Futuyo Karaba of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition (SPLM/A-IO).
- The opposition has popular support in both states. It is hamstrung by an acute lack of materiel and is resigned to fighting a drawn-out guerrilla war against government forces with aerial superiority.
- Although populations in both states are weary of war, elite competition risks drawing them back into protracted conflict.

¹ South Sudanese states and counties will be indicated at the first mention of a given state or county. This Situation Update will then use the state's or county's proper name only.

Context

In December 2024, Kiir's regime took control of SPLM/A-IO checkpoints in Western Equatoria and Western Bahr el Ghazal (Craze, 2025b). This engagement was the precursor to a political dismemberment of the opposition. In February 2025, Kiir dismissed Futuyo as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) governor of Western Equatoria. He was eventually replaced by a Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM)-loyalist, in an abrogation of the peace agreement. In Western Bahr el Ghazal, Sherif Daniel Sherif, a member of an opposition faction in Juba, was appointed governor in September 2025.² With the opposition politically decimated, the government's campaign against the SPLM/A-IO returned to a military footing.

Oscillations between violence and politics form part of a continuum. During the South Sudanese civil war (2013–18), Kiir's regime inflicted a series of military defeats on Riek Machar's SPLM/A-IO (Craze, 2023a). The era (2018–25) inaugurated by the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018 (IGAD, 2018) enabled Kiir's regime to extend its domination by strategically stalling the peace agreement (Craze and Marko, 2022). Opposition fighters wasted away waiting for an integration into the Necessary Unified Forces that never occurred (Craze, 2020). The opposition haemorrhaged support. Meanwhile, Kiir's regime built a fractious coalition by turning politicians against each other (Craze, 2025a). This political strategy was twinned with violent government incursions into opposition-held territory, particularly in southern Unity state, designed to immiserate SPLM/A-IO supporters (UNHRC, 2023).

Diplomats in Juba are concerned with how to 'get the peace agreement back on track'.³ Yet the current conflict in South Sudan is part of the logic of the peace agreement, not an exception to it. The R-ARCSS was not designed to be fully implemented. Instead, it was intended to be a form of creative unsettlement, in which Kiir's regime strategically manipulated violence and interruptions in state function to create a system in which disorder became a means of rule (Pospisil, 2025). From this perspective, South Sudan's conflict does not represent a crisis but a continuity. Machar's arrest and trial for the March 2025 events in Nasir town⁴—during which the white armies took over the barracks of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF)—came after seven years of Kiir's regime marginalizing the opposition in Juba and fracturing its support base elsewhere.⁵ The removal of almost every opposition figure from the government in recent months is part of a coherent regime strategy.

Clashes in Western Bahr el Ghazal and Western Equatoria do not represent a breakdown of order; they fulfil a political purpose. In Juba, Kiir's regime intends for Machar's trial to continue for as long as possible.⁶ The government's strategy is for Machar to be found guilty and then pardoned by Kiir, in a conditional 'magnanimous' gesture that would require him to withdraw from political life. It is unclear what Machar's response would be to such a demand. The government wants to prolong the trial, giving the opposition leader minimal time to prepare for the 2026 elections that Kiir—if he can overcome the hesitations of those around him (Craze, 2025a)—hopes will finally occur. Continued attacks on the opposition on the ground serve a political function. They keep the SPLM/A-IO harassed while the trial continues.

The point of the conflict is not to win. Kiir's regime cannot clear the SPLM/A-IO from areas where the

2 Stephen Par Kuol formed his own SPLM-IO splinter group in April 2025, which was not recognized by either the SPLM/A-IO on the ground or the interim chairperson of the movement, Nathaniel Oyet. Kiir's regime has, however, recognized the SPLM-IO under Par Kuol, in a transparent attempt to create a fictional faction of the opposition that is subservient to the government. This manoeuvre repeats its prior attempt to install Taban Deng Gai as the SPLM/A-IO chairperson in 2016 (Craze, 2016).

3 Author conversations with diplomats and UN staff in Juba, South Sudan, July to October 2025.

4 Towns that share the same name as a county, state, or area will be referenced as towns to avoid confusion with the counties to which they belong.

5 The white armies in Nasir, South Sudan, acted independently of Machar (Craze, forthcoming).

6 Author interviews with government politicians and figures in the SPLM hierarchy, September to October 2025.

government has no legitimacy. Instead of eliminating the opposition, the government wants to create an enemy—an insurgency it can then repress. Aerial bombardments and assassinations foment anger that drives mobilizations. These mobilizations allow the government to instantiate counterinsurgency as a modality of rule. Counterinsurgency enables commanders to be rewarded with positions, looting to sustain loyal militias, and defections that pit opposition forces against each other. This process has no final goal; it constitutes its own end.

Finding Futuyo

Futuyo's appointment as governor in 2020 was unpopular with the Avongara elite of the Azande, who have struggled to control Western Equatoria since 2005 (Craze, 2023c). The elite tarred Futuyo as a foreign interloper.⁷ In response, Futuyo—previously a commander in the largely Azande 'Arrow Boys' movement (Small Arms Survey, 2016)—refashioned himself as a Balanda ethno-nationalist.⁸ Political tensions between the SPLM/A-IO and the government's coalition were transposed onto an ethnic distinction. The situation exploded after James Nando, one of Futuyo's principal commanders, defected in 2020. Balanda forces under commander Angelo Davide clashed with Nando's predominantly Azande troops in 2021, leaving hundreds of people dead (UNMISS and OHCHR, 2022). Kiir's regime intervened, warehousing Nando in Juba. State politics nonetheless divided along ethnic lines.

In December 2024, Kiir mandated Nando—who he had released from house arrest—to clear SPLM/A-IO checkpoints on the Tambura–Wau Road. Controlling checkpoints has become a principal source of revenue for military groups in South Sudan, after the government stopped paying wages and disbursing petrodollars to loyalist militias (Craze, 2023a). The removal of checkpoints—a frequent plea from diplomats and humanitarians—has all too often masked the seizure of territory from the SPLM/A-IO.

Strikes against opposition checkpoints quickly morphed into a full-blown military campaign. In January 2025, SSPDF meant to deploy to eastern DRC returned from the border to Tambura and Nagero counties and attacked Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO) cantonment sites. The situation intensified after Futuyo's dismissal in February 2025. Nando's forces assailed Futuyo's residence and forced him to flee, before sweeping through Yambio, the state capital, and detaining opposition ministers. Several politicians subsequently joined the government; others are still missing. Simultaneously, Nando attacked Davide's camps in northern Tambura. Futuyo fled Yambio for the SPLA-IO cantonment site in Li Rangu, pursued by Nando's forces. Over the next two months, Nando followed Futuyo, seizing SPLA-IO bases wherever he went—first to Nadiangere and Sue in Yambio, and then to Nagero. Futuyo was to be found, even if it meant razing much of Western Equatoria.

The opposition was taken aback by the speed of the assault and struggled to develop a military response. It was further weakened by defections that followed Futuyo's removal. In early April 2025, approximately 500 soldiers and political personnel defected in Yambio and Nzara counties.⁹ Further defections followed, with almost all the SPLA-IO Azande commanders declaring their loyalty to the government. Even Davide is rumoured to be working with Nando, although as of October 2025, he remains in hiding in the Nabanga forest on the Tambura–Wau Road.

Balanda in the SPLM/A-IO face an existential impasse. The 2021 violence that fractured the political compact in Western Equatoria led many in the Balanda community to see a monoethnic administrative area as their only way forward. Futuyo met these demands, declaring Nadiangere an administrative area in 2024. After his removal, his SPLM deputy, Daniel Badagbu Rimbasa, became the acting governor of Western Equatoria. Rimbasa, a Zande protégé of Jemma Nunu Kumba—the Avongara speaker of South Sudan's Transitional

7 While Futuyo's mother is a Zande—although not part of the Avongara elite—his father is a Balanda from Western Bahr el Ghazal.

8 Author interview with Futuyo in Yambio, South Sudan, August 2023.

9 Author interviews with sources in Yambio and Nzara, South Sudan, April to June 2025.

National Legislative Assembly—rescinded Futuyo’s order in April 2025. This reversal came as Balanda were removed from state and church positions. Political marginalization occurred in the context of more visceral dislocations. Nando’s fighters killed and raped Balanda community members and looted healthcare facilities (UNMISS and OHCHR, 2022). Videos of SSPDF torture circulated widely among opposition fighters. For them, Nando is not fighting the opposition, but the Balanda community itself.

The SPLA-IO response has been equally brutal. The Balanda opposition, led by William Ngbori¹⁰ in Nagero and Tambura, has raped women, looted healthcare facilities, and intentionally targeted farmers to disrupt the harvest. Like Nando’s forces, the SPLA-IO has carried out abductions and extrajudicial executions (UNMISS and OHCHR, 2022). Both sides aim to disrupt the opposing community’s capacity to survive. Ngbori’s forces fight for a monoethnic administrative area on land also claimed by the Azande, producing a zero-sum conflict for territory and power.

The opposition is pessimistic about its chances, as it lacks materiel and has failed to secure external support.¹¹ Most of its materiel has been taken from the SSPDF. The need to acquire ammunition has shaped its strategy. The SPLA-IO has focused on ambushes and lightning strikes on SSPDF barracks, withdrawing with anything it obtains. Given the SSPDF’s aerial dominance, the SPLA-IO is fighting a guerrilla war out of the state’s forests, focused on encircling government towns. SSPDF aerial bombardments of SPLA-IO positions in Western Equatoria have proved ineffective.

Conflict has also come to the east of Western Equatoria. After a brief sojourn in Western Bahr el Ghazal, Futuyo moved to the Greater Mundri area and Maridi county to avoid Nando’s forces. There, he opened a new front, launching rapid attacks on SSPDF bases—most notably in September 2025—when the opposition captured the Kediba garrison in

Mundri East county. In the assault, the SPLA-IO were aided by Thomas Cirillo’s National Salvation Front (NAS), with which Oyet’s forces had recently signed an alliance. Although NAS had waned in recent years, it was partly revitalized in March 2025 when Cirillo reunited with John Kenyi Loburon and another experienced commander. While the SPLM/A-IO and NAS joint force quickly withdrew from Kediba, the two sides have worked together efficiently.

The war is at an impasse. The government cannot dislodge the opposition from the bush. Tambura, Nagero, and Yambio are surrounded, and the roads between them are perilous. Kiir’s regime relies on airstrikes and occasional army sallies from its embattled stockade-towns. Its position mirrors that of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) during the second Sudanese civil war between 1983 and 2005, with the opposition playing the part of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A).

Wagner Ti Azande

The AAKG, a monoethnic Azande militia based in CAR’s Haut-Mbomou prefecture, has taken an increasing role in the South Sudan conflict. Formed in 2023 following attacks by the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC) on Zande settlements, the AAKG emerged in the context of latent tensions between the pastoralist Puehl, a majority within the UPC, and the agrarian Azande.¹² In March 2023, the group captured Bambouti, gaining control of gold mines and cross-border weapons flows to Nando.

In the AAKG, President Faustin-Archange Touadera’s CAR regime saw an opportunity. In March 2024, it dispatched the Wagner Group to Obo to conduct a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programme. Instead, the Wagner Group trained and armed the AAKG, which then fought alongside CAR’s army to take Mboki and Zemio from the UPC. By August, relations between the AAKG and the Wagner

10 Author telephone interviews with sources in Western Equatoria, South Sudan, June to September 2025.

11 Author interviews with SPLM/A-IO commanders and politicians in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Nairobi, Kenya, July to September 2025.

12 Relative peace in CAR’s Haut-Mbomou was upended in 2015 when the UPC moved into the area, taking control of Bambouti, Mboki, and Zemio by 2019 on the border with South Sudan, opposite the Source Yubu village.

Group had soured, and the Azande militia expelled its trainers. Despite this, the AAKG now operates as ‘Wagner Ti Azande’. It is active in South Sudan.

The integration of ‘foreign’ Azande fighters into Nando’s ranks marks a reversal by the Avongara elite (Craze 2023c). Once a powerful royal kingdom spanning parts of southern Sudan, CAR, and the DRC (Hillary, 2024), the Zande were last united under King Gbudwe, who was killed in 1905 by British colonialists. While he was feted by the Azande for his military prowess, he was feared by other groups for the same reason. In 2022, a century after Gbudwe’s death, the Zande monarchy was restored, with Atoroba Peni Rikito crowned king, leading to apprehension among Western Equatoria’s other ethnic groups. While the restoration of the monarchy was a cause for great celebrations among the Azande, it also created questions about the nature of the new kingdom. It would have to exist within the nation-state of South Sudan, without military or political sovereignty, and alongside a rivalrous Zande SPLM political elite ensconced in positions of power in Juba (Craze, 2024). The AAKG was formed the year after the Azande Kingdom’s reconstitution, as tensions immediately arose between Juba and some members of the kingdom. One dispute concerned a South Sudanese Azande community defence force, founded in 2023, which claimed to be the kingdom’s army. It was dissolved by Avongara leaders in Juba, who were wary of alienating Kiir.

In 2025, integrating such militias into the government coalition has bolstered, rather than undermined, Kiir’s strategy. The SSPDF in Western Equatoria is demoralized and underfunded. Lacking a coherent national army, the government’s counterinsurgency consists of conjoining two forces. Aerial superiority provided by government-aligned forces is combined with militia forces that undertake the actual fighting. These forces include the Agwelek in Upper Nile state, as well as the AAKG and Nando’s militia in Western Equatoria. While these militias have their own local aims that are not Juba’s, they form an uneasy partnership with the national government when their interests overlap.

On 4 September 2025 in Western Equatoria, the AAKG deputy commander in CAR, Umeko Duandugu, was killed by the SPLA-IO in Tambura.¹³ The CAR-based AAKG offered its condolences to the South Sudanese AAKG and directed its units in CAR and the DRC to join the conflict. Audio recordings from Nando echoed these appeals, calling for a pan-Zande force to liberate Azande areas held by the SPLM/A-IO. By late September, a combined AAKG force—including recruits from the DRC—was active in Obo and Zemio on the CAR side of the border, where they ambushed commercial vehicles.

Nando, who was previously an ‘Arrow Boy’ commander and later an SPLM/A-IO member, leads a militia whose objectives align with Kiir’s regime—at least for now. It is possible that this force could foment their own rebellion in the future and turn against the government.

A war ‘almost’ nobody wants

SSPDF attacks on SPLM/A-IO checkpoints in Jur River county in Western Bahr el Ghazal in December 2024 did not spark wider conflict. Tensions resurfaced, however, in September 2025, when SPLA-IO defections triggered clashes. On 9 October 2025, the SPLA-IO ambushed an SSPDF convoy on the Wau–Tonj Road. The SSPDF division five commander in Wau county, Jiel Mangok Yel, ordered troops to secure the area. The reappointment of Paul Nang Majok as the chief of defence forces on the same day presaged an intensification of hostilities. On 12 October, Nang ordered SPLA-IO forces to report to SSPDF barracks or be considered hostile forces. Airstrikes followed on 14 October, targeting Jur River opposition positions and villages linked to SPLA-IO commanders. These airstrikes, seemingly intended to secure the Wau–Warrap transport corridor, followed SSPDF incursions targeting civilians and SPLA-IO positions, as if trying to incite a conflict.

Under Sarah Cleto Rial’s gubernatorial reign, there was relative stability in the state (Craze, 2023b). Although the security services remained under Dinka

¹³ Duandugu was also an officer in the SSPDF.

control, and her governorship was unpopular among members of the SPLM/A-IO. Cleto maintained peace by managing ties with her SPLM deputy, Joseph Zachariah, a protégé of Rizik Zachariah Hassan, the state's central powerbroker. In November 2024, under pressure from SPLM/A-IO Secretary General Regina Joseph Kaba, Machar replaced Cleto with Emmanuel Primo Okello, a Kaba supporter and her cousin. Primo and Cleto are Fertit from Wau. Primo's appointment angered Luo SPLM/A-IO commanders from Jur River, who felt the governorship should come to their area. These commanders already felt marginalized, after a Chinese-built bridge to the Jur River was named after a Fertit politician, Clement Mboro. Following Primo's appointment, opposition commander Gabriel Bol Wek (TwalTwal) barred Primo from entering Jur River and urged resistance. These developments upended the state's historical ethnic-political balance, in which the SPLM/A had always been able to rely on Dinka and Luo support.

After the Nasir town incident, Primo prevaricated on Par Kuol. While Fertit politicians in Wau saw joining his faction as a way to retain control of the state capital, they worried about Par Kuol's unpopularity. The SPLM/A-IO's strong support among the Fertit is rooted in memories of the 2012 violence that followed the government's attempt to relocate Wau's headquarters to the Baggari *payam*¹⁴—a move people feared would entrench Dinka dominance in Wau. Baggari remains off-limits to the government and is a wellspring of opposition support in the state. Some politicians, however, sensed an opportunity in the changing political climate. Valentino Akech—the state minister of agriculture and deputy SPLM/A-IO chair—backed Par Kuol, as did Cleto, who became the national minister of health. Primo also eventually backed Par Kuol.

By September, Kiir's regime had grown increasingly concerned about the security situation in Western Bahr el Ghazal, particularly regarding the links between the state's opposition and Balanda commanders in Western Equatoria.¹⁵ On 2 September 2025, Primo was replaced by Sherif, a battle-hardened officer who had

served with the SAF during the second civil war. He later joined Machar's SPLM/A-IO as a senior intelligence officer. Sherif's appointment, along with changes in the National Security Service (NSS) leadership that brought in officers from Yirol, Lakes state, and Gogrial, Warrap state, placed Wau on a war footing.

The government has sought to recruit in Western Bahr el Ghazal, principally among unemployed youth in Wau, to buttress its forces there. It has had little success. The opposition discouraged enlistment, while some new conscripts deserted. In Jur River, the government reported 2,100 SPLM/A-IO defections in late October 2025 (Radio Tamazuj, 2025). Realistically, only a few hundred did so—mostly civilians who joined the SSPDF to avoid airstrikes and army destruction of their crops.

Kiir's regime has had more success in using former opposition military commanders. Joseph Arop, who defected in 2020, now commands troops on the road to Baggari. Charles Uchalla Muong, a Jur River commander long warehoused in Juba, has been deployed to counter TwalTwal's influence. Sherif also appointed a new mayor of Wau, Joseph John Andrea from Baggari, who has been tasked with identifying SPLM/A-IO figures who might defect to Par Kuol's faction.

The opposition has recruited far more effectively, especially in Baggari, where more than 1,000 young men have joined SPLM/A-IO commander Benson Joseph. Community leaders have also attempted to repair his relationship with Abdullah Ujang, the head of SPLM/A-IO Division 6A, who is under house arrest in Wau. Both men are Balanda, albeit from different areas, and they are divided over revenue collection and historical animosities. Despite these divisions, the SPLM/A-IO remains relatively unified. In April 2025, Futuyo, TwalTwal, Joseph, Musa Dakumi—the SPLA-IO commander for Raga county—and Ujang's deputy, Peter Ngoli, held a coordination meeting in Baggari. While the opposition is prepared for war, they are reluctant to fight, reflecting the state's weariness.

¹⁴ South Sudan is divided into ten states (and two administrative areas). Each of those states is divided into counties, which are further divided into payams, and payams, into bomas.

¹⁵ The Fertit is an umbrella term for several ethnic groups in Western Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan, one of which is the Balanda.

Raga remains central to the state's stability. Its population is deeply loyal to the SPLM/A-IO, locally led by Dakumi and Addison Arcangelo, the SPLM-IO commissioner who retained his post even after other opposition figures in the state government were dismissed. The opposition elite are integrated into a cross-border war economy. Rapid Support Forces (RSF) gold flows from Sudan's South Darfur Songo mine to Raga, then to Wau, and onward to Juba on NSS-operated commercial flights. Gold from Raga follows similar routes, managed by NSS and SPLM/A-IO security officials, while petrol and cars move in the opposite direction, sustaining the RSF's war effort in the Darfur region of Sudan. This trade has united fractious military commanders, including two Kresh from Raga—Sherif and Hassan.

Foreign actors reinforce this precarious alliance. The RSF now maintains a presence in Wau, where its chairperson is accompanied by an SSPDF military intelligence minder, serving as both a bodyguard and a lookout to ensure that the RSF does not make common cause with the SPLM/A-IO. Between August and September 2024, the Uganda People's Defence Force deployed to Boro Medina in Raga to secure NSS-linked mining operations, much to the chagrin of local miners. Nearly four dozen Ugandan soldiers have since rotated into Boro Medina.

For Juba, Wau remains a central commercial hub, and recent airstrikes aim to keep open the roads that connect it with the rest of the country. Yet some figures inside the SPLM stand to profit from renewed war. Most notably, Deputy Governor Zachariah, who seeks the SPLM governorship of the state, has repeatedly provoked the SPLA-IO. He is deeply unpopular in Wau and is thought of as a force for disorder. Several members of the SPLM elite in the state, including the SPLM state secretary, Viola Alexander, are angling to replace him. Zachariah could yet push Western Bahr el Ghazal into an all-out war.

Conclusion

Kiir's regime views its current military campaign as a success. The Nasir town incident has been used to undermine Machar, and most SPLM/A-IO leaders are in prison or exiled. Kiir's power grab, which began with his cabinet purge in mid-2013, appears nearly complete.

In the rest of the country, however, the current situation is unsustainable. The humanitarian situation has gone from bad to worse, and the government has almost no legitimacy. Support for the opposition in Western Bahr el Ghazal and Western Equatoria is widespread. Such is the government's success in fracturing political constituencies in South Sudan that this popular discontent finds no voice except in local dissent with existing state governments. Such anger, easily ethnicized, is all too often an engine for Kiir's regime's fragmentation of the country and not a remedy for it.

This reality is dimly captured by the R-ARCSS. The peace agreement is no longer a vehicle for bringing peace to South Sudan—if it ever was—given the depth of regional involvement in the country's conflict and the fractured nature of its politics. ●

Abbreviations and acronyms

AAKG	Azande Ani Kpi Gbe
CAR	Central African Republic
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
NAS	National Salvation Front
NSS	National Security Service
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SPLA-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM/A-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition
SPLM-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition
SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defence Forces
UPC	Union for Peace in the Central African Republic

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This Situation Update was funded by a grant from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



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