

SITUATION UPDATE

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Attacked from Both Sides: Abyei's Existential Dilemma

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KEY FINDINGS

- Abyei remains in a political stalemate. This impasse has been politically productive for Juba and Khartoum; even if the conflict in Sudan had not broken out on 15 April, it is unlikely that any progress would have been made with regards to the territory's future.
- The real causes of the conflict between the Ngok and Twic Dinka are socio-economic. In a situation of political marginalization and economic disempowerment, the Twic are attempting to take control of the Annet market and Agok.
- A year of unsuccessful, high-profile interventions, including from South Sudanese President Salva Kiir, has failed to address the causes of this violence.
- The UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) is perceived as partisan by both the Ngok and Twic Dinka, albeit for different reasons, and the mission has struggled to fulfil its mandate to protect civilians since the Ngok–Twic conflict began in February 2022.
- The negotiating positions of the Sudanese government and the Ngok Dinka remain unchanged, and the issues that divided the two parties in May 2011, when the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) invaded the territory, still separate them today. There is little hope that these differences can be bridged.
- Given the antagonisms between the Ngok Dinka and the Misseriya—to the north—and the Twic—to the south—it is likely that conflict will continue in Abyei in the coming months. Such violence will not be transformative; however, while low-intensity violence may receive less attention, it is no less catastrophic for the people of Abyei.

Context

Abyei was due to have a referendum in 2011 on whether its inhabitants wished to join southern Sudan, if South Sudan voted to secede from Sudan after conducting its own referendum (Craze, 2011, pp. 23–27). While South Sudan became a sovereign nation, Abyei's referendum ran aground due to a disagreement over voter eligibility.

Instead of having the opportunity to vote, Abyei was invaded by SAF in May 2011 (Craze, 2013). The Ngok Dinka fled south to Agok. Following an agreement reached later that year, SAF withdrew from most of Abyei, and the Ngok Dinka gradually returned to Abyei town, with a mono-ethnic administration taking de facto control of the centre and south of the territory. The Ngok have not been able to return to the north of Abyei due to SAF's presence around the area's sole oil field, Diffra—despite repeated calls by the UN Security Council for the force to withdraw. While the subsequent decade has been somewhat stable, Abyei has stagnated politically.

In October 2013, the Ngok Dinka held a unilateral referendum, in which they voted to join South Sudan, though neither Khartoum nor Juba recognized the result. Khartoum insists that any referendum on Abyei's future must include the Misseriya, some of whom migrate seasonally into Abyei. This is a redline for the Ngok Dinka, who fear that many Misseriya who do not migrate will also register as voters, ensuring that Abyei votes to stay in Sudan.¹

A decade of diplomatic stalemate has been deleterious to the people of Abyei, but eminently productive for Sudan. Khartoum benefits from oil revenues from Diffra, which—despite the commitments made in several peace agreements—do not go to Abyei, but are instead shared with Juba.²

The impasse in Abyei is also politically productive for Juba. It enables Kiir to rhetorically support Abyei joining South Sudan while making no substantive

moves that would risk angering Khartoum. Since 2013, Kiir has become much closer to the Sudanese regime. This realignment prevented the Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO), and more recently the Kitgwan faction, from receiving much succour in Sudan.

Origins of the Ngok–Twic conflict

The Ngok and Twic Dinka are historically very close. Friction only emerged in 2017, when the Abyei Area Administration (AAA) began a land registry in Annet, a bustling market near Agok, in southern Abyei. The Twic Dinka denounced the land registry, which was subsequently halted. The putative reason for this discontent was that some Twic Dinka claimed that Agok and Annet are located within Twic county, Warrap state. The Ngok Dinka, however, consider the boundaries of Abyei to have been determined by a decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in 2009, and Agok and Annet to be part of their territory. The Twic's claim to these territories is very recent in origin and is not actually about long-standing territorial disagreements, but rather an attempt to control Annet and the humanitarian hub in Agok, where many international NGOs based themselves following SAF's invasion of Abyei.

Twic claims to southern Abyei are bound up in the mutual marginalization of the two communities. The Ngok Dinka feel forgotten by a South Sudanese government intent on forging a relationship with Khartoum. The Twic, too, feel marginalized; the removal of Bona Panek (the then Twic governor of Warrap) and his replacement by Aleu Ayieny Aleu saw the Twic lose influence in Kuajok and Juba (Craze, 2022). The Twic saw the weakness of Ngok Dinka as an opportunity. Agok's status as a humanitarian hub and the tax base offered by Annet have provided a source of income for the AAA. Twic county has seen almost no economic development

¹ The Misseriya are a much broader group than those from the Ajaira and Felaita *gabilly* (section) of the Humr that annually migrate into Abyei, and include groups in Darfur and Chad.

² Interviews with Abyei Area Administration (AAA) officials, Abyei, September 2022.

and, like the rest of South Sudan, has suffered from a government in Juba bent on the illegitimate acquisition of resources (Craze, 2023). Twic county is not alone: communities across the country have made exclusive claims to control of territory and resources in response to the exploitation of the country by politicians in Juba, and the withdrawal of the government from the provision of wages and services (Craze and Marko, 2022).

A year of clashes

The chief administrator of the AAA at the time, Kuol Deim Kuol, restarted the land registry in December 2021.³ The commissioner of Twic county, Deng Goch Tong, then wrote to Kuol asking him to stop the registry, as well as making a Twic claim to all the land south of the river Kiir. The rhetorical strategy of the letter was to claim that Abyei is part of Kordofan so that the Twic position appeared to be part of a broader South Sudanese claim to the territory of greater Bahr el Ghazal. The Twic sought to capitalize on national political antagonisms around Abyei and deploy them to local ends.

On 9 February 2022, Twic Dinka youth went to Mading Jok-Thiang and removed survey pegs: they were arrested and reportedly mistreated by the authorities in Rumameer, the county in which Agok is located. In response to these rumours, the Twic Dinka mobilized, and attacked Annet market. Fighting soon spread to other contested areas in southern Abyei, with Annet market burned down and 70,000 people displaced. Ngok Dinka counter-attacks also resulted in tens of thousands of Twic fleeing further south into Twic county.

Clashes continued into March 2022. Twic assaults on settlements in the south of Abyei were paralleled by Misseriya attacks in the north, including on Amiet. Established by the Misseriya and the Ngok in 2016, Amiet was Abyei's second major market. The assaults on the two markets were designed to attack the AAA's economic base, and effectively

squeeze the Ngok Dinka into the centre of Abyei. While the Twic laid claim to all the land *south* of the river Kiir, some Misseriya laid claim to all the land *north* of the river; caught between these two maximalist claims, the Ngok felt under existential threat. In response, Ngok Dinka youth organized themselves into community defence forces and attacked the Twic Dinka. While the Misseriya attacks were part of long-standing intermittent conflict between the two groups, the Twic attacks were felt by the Ngok to be the principal threat to the territory—hence the focus on the Twic–Ngok conflict by the community defence forces.

Violence continued intermittently throughout 2022. In May–June, the Ngok Dinka launched retaliatory raids into Twic, while the Twic Dinka carried out attacks inside Abyei. During the heavy rains of July and August, the conflict calmed, though the Twic Dinka set up checkpoints on the roads into Abyei, robbing private vehicles and traders, and laying siege to the territory. By September, the price of sugar in Abyei town had increased three-fold in three months and bottled water had run out. This siege was designed to depopulate the south of Abyei and make it as difficult as possible for the Ngok to sustain life.⁴

Clashes recommenced later that month—with one Twic attack on Annet alone resulting in approximately 50 deaths on 25 September—and continued through to the end of the year. Further clashes have occurred in 2023, with the Ngok Dinka taking a more aggressive position and attacking northern Twic county. While the Ngok Dinka have attempted to shift the locus of the fighting into Warrap, the Twic Dinka have responded with raids into southern Abyei. The goal of these raids has been to keep southern Abyei depopulated, as civilians attempt to return from Abyei town. The Twic position is that a resolution to the territorial dispute must be reached before any such returns can occur.

During these clashes, the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) has been hamstrung. In

³ Kuol was replaced as chief administrator by Chol Deng Alaak on 9 January 2023.

⁴ Interviews with AAA officials, Abyei, September 2022.

theory, Abyei is demilitarized, which limited the extent to which the army could intervene to prevent conflict in the territory. From the beginning, however, SSPDF attempts to mediate the conflict have been beset by accusations of partisanship. The Ngok Dinka accused SSPDF Division 3 forces under General Akuei Ajou Akuei of favouring the Twic, while the Twic accused the Abyei Independence Brigade under Mario Kuol Monyuluak of favouring the Ngok. Divisions 7B and 11 of the SSPDF were also involved in the fighting.⁵

The SSPDF deployed to Agok town in October 2022, but has not succeeded in preventing clashes. The AAA has called for the establishment of a buffer zone on the border between Abyei and Twic county. Such a zone is unlikely to be effective, however, as the border is too porous. In 2023, the SSPDF have increasingly become a target for the two groups: an SSPDF outpost in Ajac Kuac was attacked by Ngok Dinka on 22 February, and another outpost on 14 March, while Twic youth have also prevented SSPDF from moving from Abyei into Twic county.

A year of agreements dishonoured

Since clashes commenced in February 2022, there have been a raft of unsuccessful attempts to mitigate the conflict. Only two weeks after fighting began, Kiir appointed a committee to investigate the violence, led by Vice President Hussein Abdelbagi Akol Agany—a Malual Dinka trader and politician whose family has long held economic and political power in the border region. The committee was beset by allegations of partisanship. The AAA was angry that the investigation had begun in Twic county, rather than Abyei, and claimed that Abdelbagi was not neutral because he had Twic family members. The Twic also considered the committee to be partisan, pointing to the presence of Deng Alor Kuol,

an important Ngok politician, on the committee.⁶ In May 2022, at the committee's behest, four officials were arrested for their involvement in the violence, including the commissioners of Alal, Rumameer, and Twic counties. The arrests failed to halt the clashes, however.

A series of negotiations between the two sides have also failed to stem violence in the area. Abdelbagi's committee organized an initial meeting in April 2022, which saw both sides commit to a cessation of hostilities agreement, only for conflict to resume two weeks later. In October 2022, a peace dialogue supported by the UN and international NGOs also failed to produce a lasting agreement, with the return of Ngok civilians to southern Abyei being framed by the Twic as an offensive act.⁷

More recently, Kiir convened a meeting in Warrap on 20 March 2023 in his hometown of Akon in Gogrial West, which brought together the governors of Lakes and Warrap, the chief administrator of Abyei, and Ngok and Twic customary leaders. Once again, both sides pledged to cease hostilities but failed to honour the agreement. A follow-up peace conference took place on 3–6 April, but no resolutions were signed; discussions broke down over the return of the Ngok Dinka to southern Abyei.

Within both the Twic and Ngok communities, conspiracy theories circulate about why the clashes continue. For many Ngok, the venerable Twic politician Bona Malwal, who had previously served in both the Sudanese and South Sudanese government, incited the violence by giving a speech in Turalei at the beginning of 2022 calling on the Twic to seize land south of the river Kiir. Bona Malwal is likely a convenient scapegoat, however, due to his high-profile feuds in the 1990s with a number of leading Ngok politicians.⁸ Another theory is that the Twic have allied with the Misseriya, via the figure of Thomas Thiel, a Twic SAF general who remained with the northern army following the signing of the

⁵ Report of Abdelbagi's commission, and telephone interviews with Ngok and Twic politicians, September 2022–May 2023.

⁶ Interviews with Twic officials, Juba, September 2022.

⁷ Telephone interviews with those present at negotiations, Abyei and Warrap, October 2022.

⁸ Interviews in Abyei with Ngok Dinka civilians and members of the political class, September 2022.

Comprehensive Peace Agreement.⁹ While it appears that information was indeed shared between the Twic and the Misseriya, and that some of the attacks have been coordinated, this is likely the full extent of the collaboration. The motivations of the two groups are importantly distinct.

Behind tales of shadowy political influence and cross-border conspiracies lie more prosaic reasons for the continuing clashes. At the root of the violence was an attempt by the Twic to exploit the political weakness of the Ngok Dinka in order to improve their own circumstances and compound the Ngok's travails by taking control of Annet. Youth discontent over the dire economic situation in Twic county was fuelled by commissioners and military officers—including Deng Tong Goch and Akuei Ajou Akuei—who hoped to profit politically from the attacks. It is these political-economic issues that need to be addressed if any future peace negotiations are to be successful, and it is these issues that have been elided over the past year.

The northern neighbour

Twic attacks on southern Abyei in 2022 come after a decade of de facto Misseriya occupation of the north of the territory, where a rival Misseriya administration has existed since 2020, led by Gumaa Dawood Musa Hamdan, based in Diffra. Thus, for the last decade, Abyei has been divided between north and south: the Misseriya and SAF control the north of the territory, and the AAA controls the centre and south of Abyei. This has led to a stand-off over humanitarian services, with the AAA largely preventing humanitarian assistance from being transported from Abyei town to the north, and Khartoum banning the use of the Anthony airstrip by humanitarian services.

The Misseriya migration into Abyei, which traditionally occurs annually between October and mid-May, takes place against this backdrop of high tensions

over the provision and distribution of resources, and has also been affected by broader political dynamics in the territory. Most notably, after the assassination of their paramount chief in 2013, the Ngok Dinka barred the Misseriya from entering what UNISFA refers to as Sector Centre and Sector South, and particularly Abyei town. This interdiction remains in place today and is one of the clearest signs of the breakdown in relations between the two communities.

In recent years, efforts to mediate between the two communities have been largely unsuccessful. On 16–17 December 2020, for instance, Misseriya and Ngok Dinka delegations failed to agree to the modalities of a meeting. A central disagreement was on nomenclature: the Ngok Dinka insisted that the meeting should be declared as being between the Ngok Dinka and the Ajaira Misseriya (one of the two Misseriya subsections that annually migrate into Abyei), while the Misseriya insisted that the meeting should simply be between the Misseriya and the Ngok Dinka. The Ngok retorted that one might as well have a meeting between the Dinka and the Misseriya, a response that lays claim to the Ngok membership of the broader Dinka people of South Sudan, just as the Ajaira and Felaita belong to the broader 'Dar Misseriya'.¹⁰ At stake in this terminological disagreement is the question of who gets to be included in Abyei. The Ngok Dinka fear that the name 'Misseriya' is a Trojan horse, hiding all of Kordofan within.

Abyei was fractured and violent throughout the 2021–22 grazing season, following these inconclusive meetings, as well as during the 2022–23 grazing season, which saw Misseriya attacks on Ngok Dinka villages in the centre of the territory and the partial destruction of Amiet market. In 2023, there have been attempts to improve the relationship between the two groups, including a peace conference held on 20–23 March, which led to a commitment to resurrect a 2016 peace agreement.¹¹

⁹ Interviews in Abyei with Ngok Dinka civilians and members of the political class, September 2022.

¹⁰ In-person and telephone interviews with international NGO members present at the negotiations and AAA officials, September 2022–May 2023.

¹¹ Telephone interview with international NGO members involved in the dialogue, May 2023.

It is unlikely, however, that these agreements will lead to a durable peace. Misseriya–Ngok Dinka violence is fundamentally structured by macro-political developments, with the Misseriya effectively used as a counter-insurgency force by Khartoum whenever the Ngok Dinka make a move towards self-determination. These political determinations mean that peace agreements are unlikely to be successful unless they address the substantive issues of Abyei’s future, such as Ngok Dinka returns to the north of the territory.

Implications for the international community

Since its inception, UNISFA has had an extremely difficult mandate to ensure security and protect civilians in Abyei. A mono-national force of Tigrayans from Ethiopia was initially designed to operate in a demilitarized territory; however, in addition to SAF forces in the north, SSPDF have entered the territory—recently setting up barracks in southern Abyei—and frequent clashes occur between the Ngok and the Misseriya. UNISFA has also been forced to act as a police force, given that Abyei’s own force had not been established due to disagreements over administration in the territory. The peacekeepers are ill-equipped to be police officers, especially as Sudan has consistently blocked the deployment of UNISFA police personnel by delaying or not granting visas.

In such a difficult context, UNISFA has often been accused of being partisan. It has acquiesced to the presence of SAF at Diffra, while proving much more efficacious in ensuring that SSPDF elements are escorted out of Abyei. The Ngok Dinka are still suspicious of UNISFA, following the 2013 assassination of their paramount chief, which was carried out in the presence of the peacekeepers. In addition, UNISFA’s ‘quick-impact’ schemes in the north of the territory have been accused of enabling Sudanese population engineering by creating the conditions for long-term Misseriya residence in the north,

while Ngok Dinka are still unable to return to their homes in the area. Finally, while UNISFA has been unable to prevent attacks on the Ngok Dinka by the Misseriya, it has provided security for the northern nomads while they graze in Abyei.

UNISFA’s situation became more difficult as negotiations between Ethiopia and Sudan in April 2021 over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) broke down, and Sudan asked the Ethiopian government to remove its forces from Abyei. The subsequent deployment of a multi-national force was delayed, leaving a security gap in Abyei that the Twic exploited. While UNISFA managed to defend the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital in Agok, the mission was unable to prevent Twic attacks on the territory. Its failure drew the ire of the Ngok Dinka—especially during the March 2023 attack on Amiet, when Ghanaian peacekeepers were accused of standing down while civilians were attacked.¹² The absence of sufficient force, a lack of knowledge of the area, and an unwillingness to intervene meant that UNISFA was almost wholly unable to stop the Ngok–Twic violence in 2022–23.

Conclusion

It is unlikely that any progress will be made on the issue of Abyei in the near future. Both Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as ‘Hemeti’), the two leaders in Sudan’s conflict, have been cultivating the Misseriya as a political constituency, though for now the nazir of the Humr Misseriya, Babu Nimr, has declared political neutrality. In such circumstances, with both the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and SAF focused on military survival, Abyei receives little attention. Militarily, the area is unlikely to become a centre for conflict. If robust South Sudanese rebel forces were in the border area, they could serve as effective RSF proxies; however, Hemeti is cautiously trying to maintain a relationship with Juba and is unlikely to want to alienate Kiir. Just as importantly, there are no rebel organizations in the border region with the sort of materiel and manpower that would make a

12 Interviews with Abyei area residents, Abyei, September 2022.

difference in the Sudanese conflict. As one political commentator stated in an interview: ‘[T]his would be a wonderful opportunity for a rebel group [. . .] If only there were rebels.’¹³

The only exception to this relatively stable prognosis is the status of Diffra. Hemeti had some success in recruitment among the Misseriya and a strike on the SAF-controlled (but Misseriya-surrounded) oil production site represents something of a nuclear option, though this remains unlikely. Hemeti is at pains to try and burnish his reputation as a credible statesperson; already stained by his presence in Moscow at the outset of the invasion of Ukraine, he would be unlikely to win support among his patrons in the United Arab Emirates for the destruction of scarce oil reserves. For Burhan, Hemeti, and Kiir alike, stasis and stagnation on the Abyei file remain the most politically productive option. ●

Abbreviations and acronyms

AAA	Abyei Area Administration
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SPLA-IO	Sudan People’s Liberation Army-in- Opposition
SSPDF	South Sudan People’s Defence Forces
UNISFA	United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei

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¹³ Telephone interview, Juba, with a South Sudanese political analyst, May 2023.

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